

# ANTHOLOGY OF DREAMS

MATTHEW MCFARLAND



A FICTION ANTHOLOGY



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## Credits

**Writers:** Deborah J. Brannon, Abigail Corfman, Nathan Dorey, Wren Handman, Jason Ross Inczauskis, Myranda Kalis, Katherine McIntyre, Geoffrey McVey, Julia Papke, Peter Woodworth

**Developer:** Matthew McFarland

**Editor:** Carol Darnell

**Art Direction and Design:** Michael Chaney

**Creative Director:** Richard Thomas



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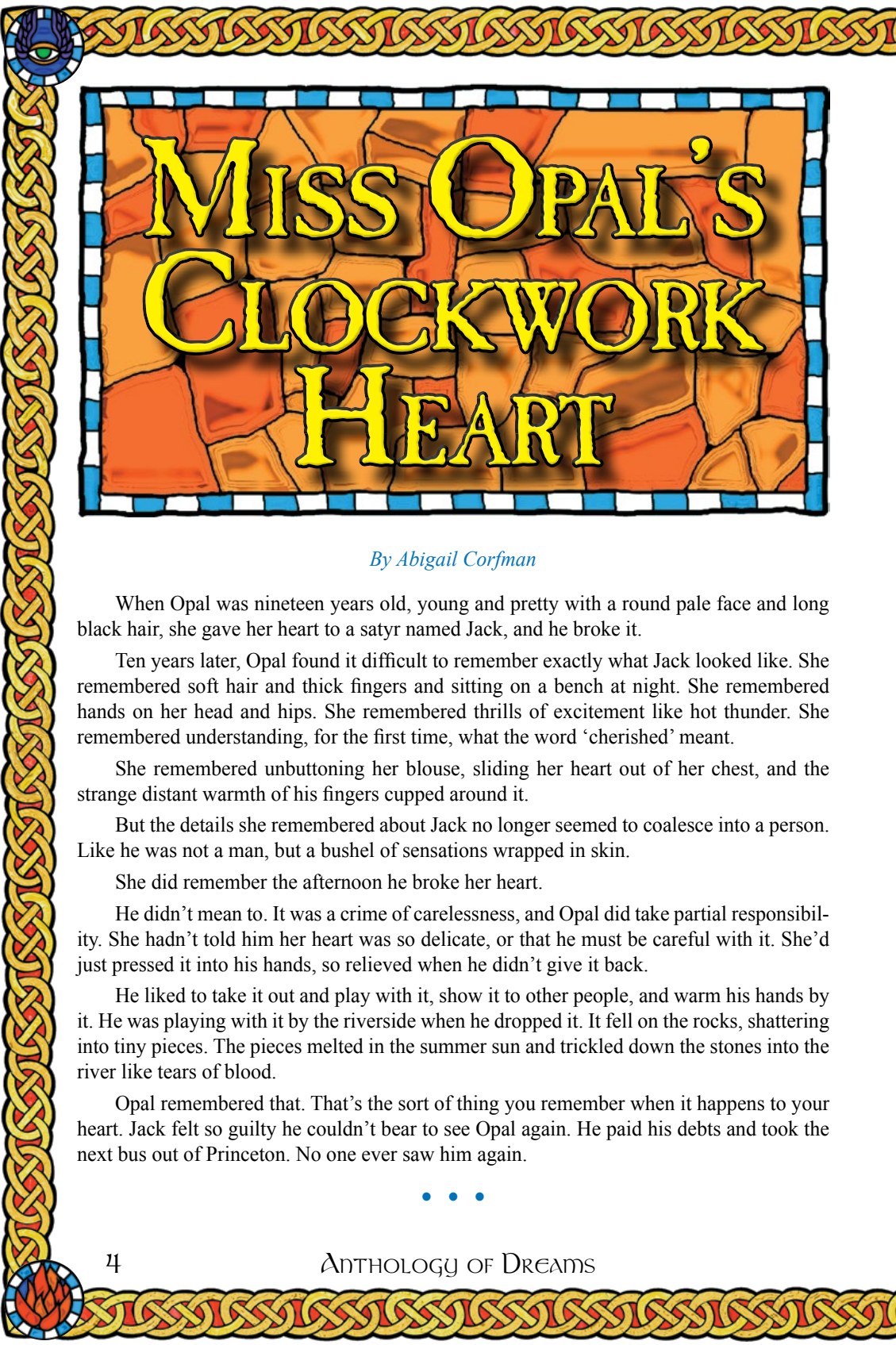
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# MISS OPAL'S CLOCKWORK HEART

*By Abigail Corfman*

When Opal was nineteen years old, young and pretty with a round pale face and long black hair, she gave her heart to a satyr named Jack, and he broke it.

Ten years later, Opal found it difficult to remember exactly what Jack looked like. She remembered soft hair and thick fingers and sitting on a bench at night. She remembered hands on her head and hips. She remembered thrills of excitement like hot thunder. She remembered understanding, for the first time, what the word 'cherished' meant.

She remembered unbuttoning her blouse, sliding her heart out of her chest, and the strange distant warmth of his fingers cupped around it.

But the details she remembered about Jack no longer seemed to coalesce into a person. Like he was not a man, but a bushel of sensations wrapped in skin.

She did remember the afternoon he broke her heart.

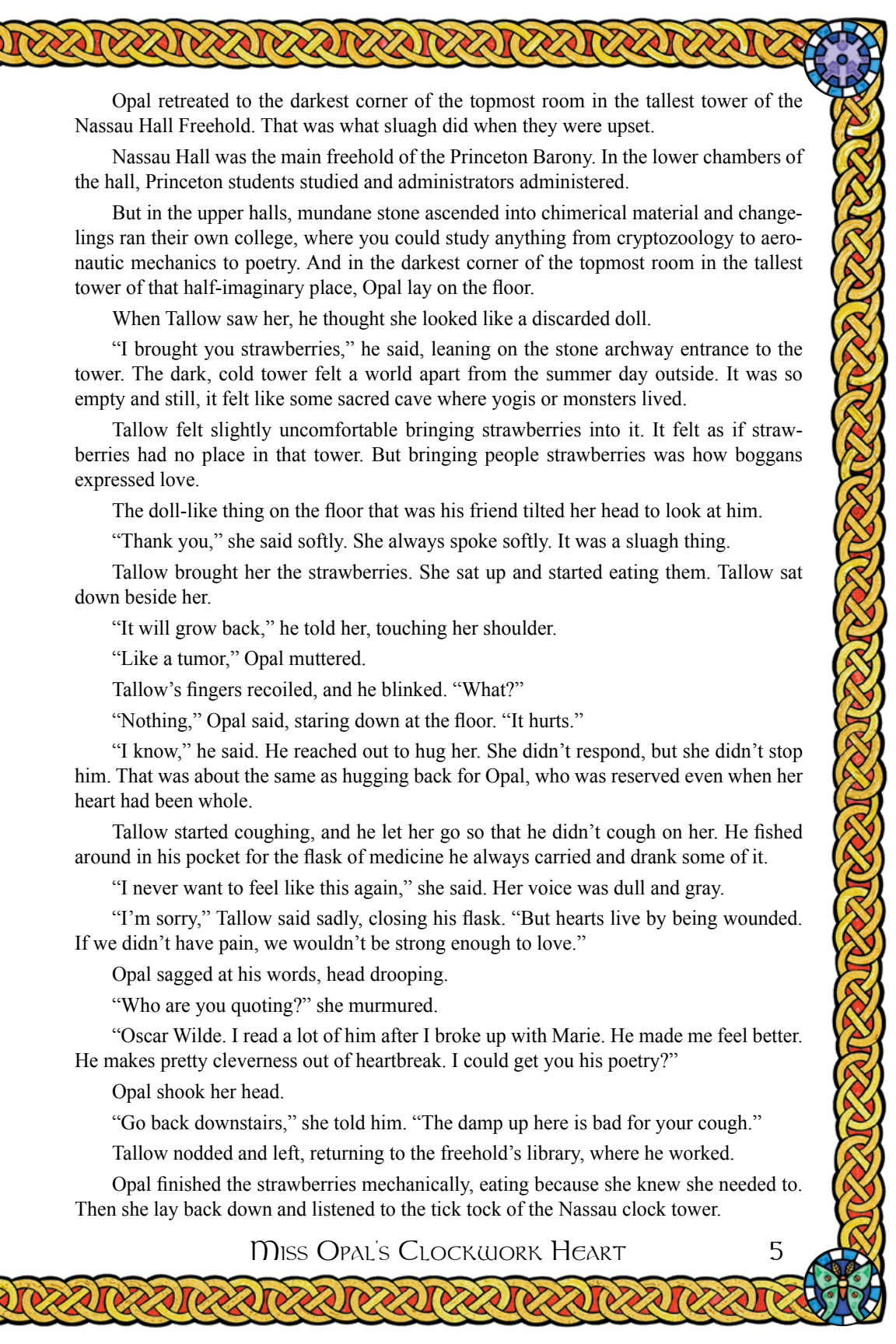
He didn't mean to. It was a crime of carelessness, and Opal did take partial responsibility. She hadn't told him her heart was so delicate, or that he must be careful with it. She'd just pressed it into his hands, so relieved when he didn't give it back.

He liked to take it out and play with it, show it to other people, and warm his hands by it. He was playing with it by the riverside when he dropped it. It fell on the rocks, shattering into tiny pieces. The pieces melted in the summer sun and trickled down the stones into the river like tears of blood.

Opal remembered that. That's the sort of thing you remember when it happens to your heart. Jack felt so guilty he couldn't bear to see Opal again. He paid his debts and took the next bus out of Princeton. No one ever saw him again.

• • •





Opal retreated to the darkest corner of the topmost room in the tallest tower of the Nassau Hall Freehold. That was what sluagh did when they were upset.

Nassau Hall was the main freehold of the Princeton Barony. In the lower chambers of the hall, Princeton students studied and administrators administered.

But in the upper halls, mundane stone ascended into chimerical material and changelings ran their own college, where you could study anything from cryptozoology to aeronautic mechanics to poetry. And in the darkest corner of the topmost room in the tallest tower of that half-imaginary place, Opal lay on the floor.

When Tallow saw her, he thought she looked like a discarded doll.

"I brought you strawberries," he said, leaning on the stone archway entrance to the tower. The dark, cold tower felt a world apart from the summer day outside. It was so empty and still, it felt like some sacred cave where yogis or monsters lived.

Tallow felt slightly uncomfortable bringing strawberries into it. It felt as if strawberries had no place in that tower. But bringing people strawberries was how boggans expressed love.

The doll-like thing on the floor that was his friend tilted her head to look at him.

"Thank you," she said softly. She always spoke softly. It was a sluagh thing.

Tallow brought her the strawberries. She sat up and started eating them. Tallow sat down beside her.

"It will grow back," he told her, touching her shoulder.

"Like a tumor," Opal muttered.

Tallow's fingers recoiled, and he blinked. "What?"

"Nothing," Opal said, staring down at the floor. "It hurts."

"I know," he said. He reached out to hug her. She didn't respond, but she didn't stop him. That was about the same as hugging back for Opal, who was reserved even when her heart had been whole.

Tallow started coughing, and he let her go so that he didn't cough on her. He fished around in his pocket for the flask of medicine he always carried and drank some of it.

"I never want to feel like this again," she said. Her voice was dull and gray.

"I'm sorry," Tallow said sadly, closing his flask. "But hearts live by being wounded. If we didn't have pain, we wouldn't be strong enough to love."

Opal sagged at his words, head drooping.

"Who are you quoting?" she murmured.

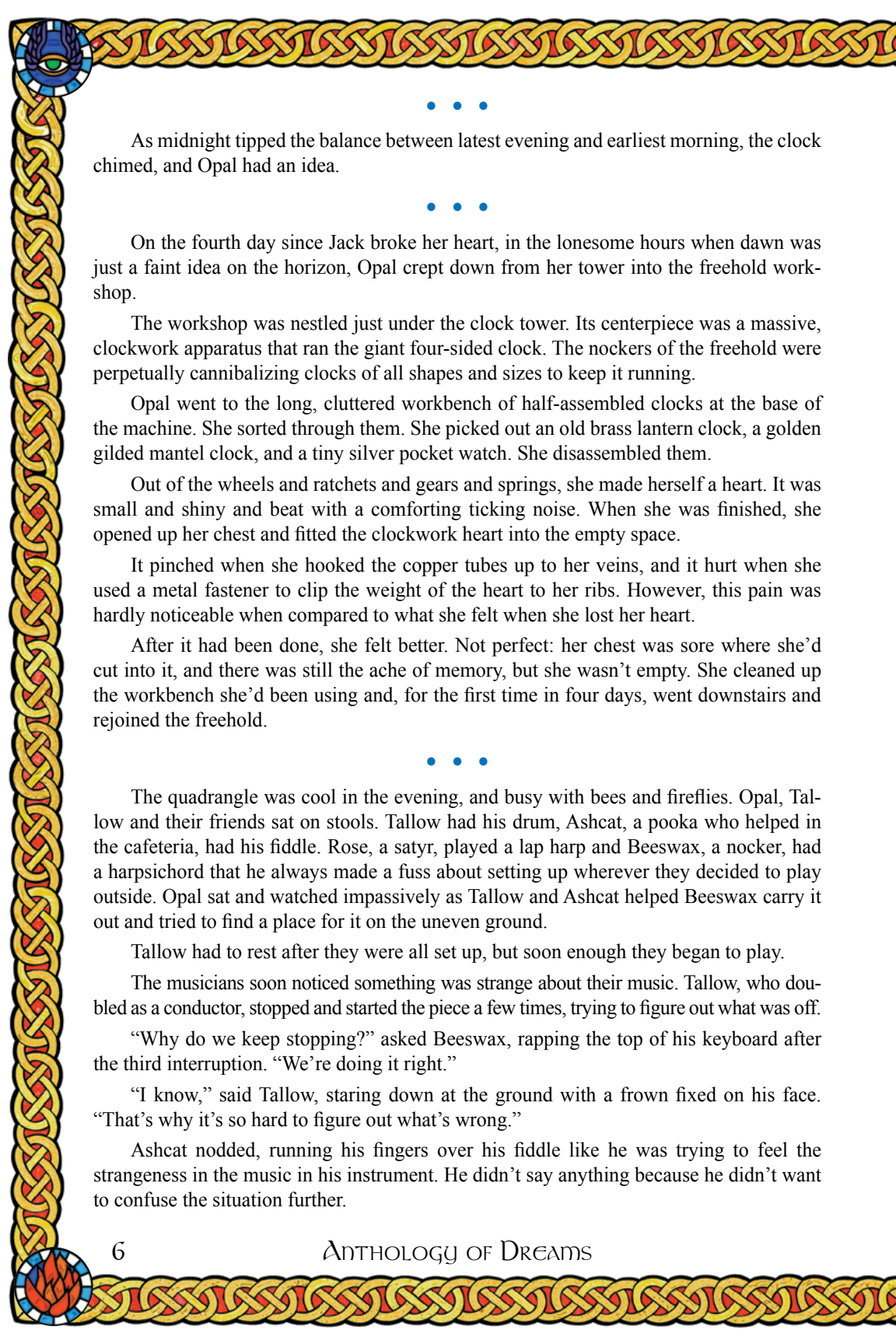
"Oscar Wilde. I read a lot of him after I broke up with Marie. He made me feel better. He makes pretty cleverness out of heartbreak. I could get you his poetry?"

Opal shook her head.

"Go back downstairs," she told him. "The damp up here is bad for your cough."

Tallow nodded and left, returning to the freehold's library, where he worked.

Opal finished the strawberries mechanically, eating because she knew she needed to. Then she lay back down and listened to the tick tock of the Nassau clock tower.



As midnight tipped the balance between latest evening and earliest morning, the clock chimed, and Opal had an idea.

On the fourth day since Jack broke her heart, in the lonesome hours when dawn was just a faint idea on the horizon, Opal crept down from her tower into the freehold workshop.

The workshop was nestled just under the clock tower. Its centerpiece was a massive, clockwork apparatus that ran the giant four-sided clock. The nockers of the freehold were perpetually cannibalizing clocks of all shapes and sizes to keep it running.

Opal went to the long, cluttered workbench of half-assembled clocks at the base of the machine. She sorted through them. She picked out an old brass lantern clock, a golden gilded mantel clock, and a tiny silver pocket watch. She disassembled them.

Out of the wheels and ratchets and gears and springs, she made herself a heart. It was small and shiny and beat with a comforting ticking noise. When she was finished, she opened up her chest and fitted the clockwork heart into the empty space.

It pinched when she hooked the copper tubes up to her veins, and it hurt when she used a metal fastener to clip the weight of the heart to her ribs. However, this pain was hardly noticeable when compared to what she felt when she lost her heart.

After it had been done, she felt better. Not perfect: her chest was sore where she'd cut into it, and there was still the ache of memory, but she wasn't empty. She cleaned up the workbench she'd been using and, for the first time in four days, went downstairs and rejoined the freehold.

The quadrangle was cool in the evening, and busy with bees and fireflies. Opal, Tallow and their friends sat on stools. Tallow had his drum, Ashcat, a pooka who helped in the cafeteria, had his fiddle. Rose, a satyr, played a lap harp and Beeswax, a nocker, had a harpsichord that he always made a fuss about setting up wherever they decided to play outside. Opal sat and watched impassively as Tallow and Ashcat helped Beeswax carry it out and tried to find a place for it on the uneven ground.

Tallow had to rest after they were all set up, but soon enough they began to play.

The musicians soon noticed something was strange about their music. Tallow, who doubled as a conductor, stopped and started the piece a few times, trying to figure out what was off.

"Why do we keep stopping?" asked Beeswax, rapping the top of his keyboard after the third interruption. "We're doing it right."

"I know," said Tallow, staring down at the ground with a frown fixed on his face. "That's why it's so hard to figure out what's wrong."

Ashcat nodded, running his fingers over his fiddle like he was trying to feel the strangeness in the music in his instrument. He didn't say anything because he didn't want to confuse the situation further.

"Well, which one of us is fucking it up?" Beeswax asked.

Tallow shot the nocker an irritated look, but then shrugged helplessly.

"Why don't we each play the piece once alone," Opal suggested.

"Right," Tallow agreed. "That should give us a better idea of what's going on. Ashcat, you start. Run through the first few measures."

Ashcat fiddled his bit and sounded just fine. Rose plucked her harp in a normal way, and Beeswax played very well, reminding them why they put up with his belligerent fussing. Then Opal began to play her flute. It was immediately apparent that she was what was strange about the music, although it took a little listening to understand why.

She played the music on the sheet. She played exactly the music on the sheet. She sounded like a music box. It was all technically correct, and it was all lifeless. They let her play the entire piece, and then stared at her when she finished.

"Are you all right?" asked Rose.

"I am fine," said Opal. "How was my playing?"

"It was perfect," said Tallow.

Opal nodded and smiled faintly.

"I think that's the problem," said Tallow.

"Excuse me?" said Opal.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Rose asked again.

"I don't have any reason to lie about the fact that I'm fine," Opal said. The anxiety in Rose's voice was grating, but only slightly. Having everyone stare at her like she'd killed the music was unnerving, but in a distant way, like she was reading the emotion off a piece of paper instead of actually experiencing it. This realization gave her the strongest feeling she'd experienced since replacing her heart. She felt safe.

She read a little disappointment off the record sheet of her emotions.

"I suppose I will have to give up music," Opal said. "I did not expect that."

"You did something to yourself," Beeswax said. "What?"

Opal smiled faintly. She unfastened the middle three buttons of her black striped blouse and opened her chest. She had added hinges to her ribs and installed a latch between her breasts, so it was easy for her to uncover her heart, which needed to be wound regularly. It glittered in the lamplight, parts spinning and whirling. The musicians stared at it, Rose transfixed like a magpie. She reached out to almost touch it before snatching her hand back.

"It's so pretty," she said uncertainly.

There was silence in the orchard except for the buzz of insects and soft ticking.

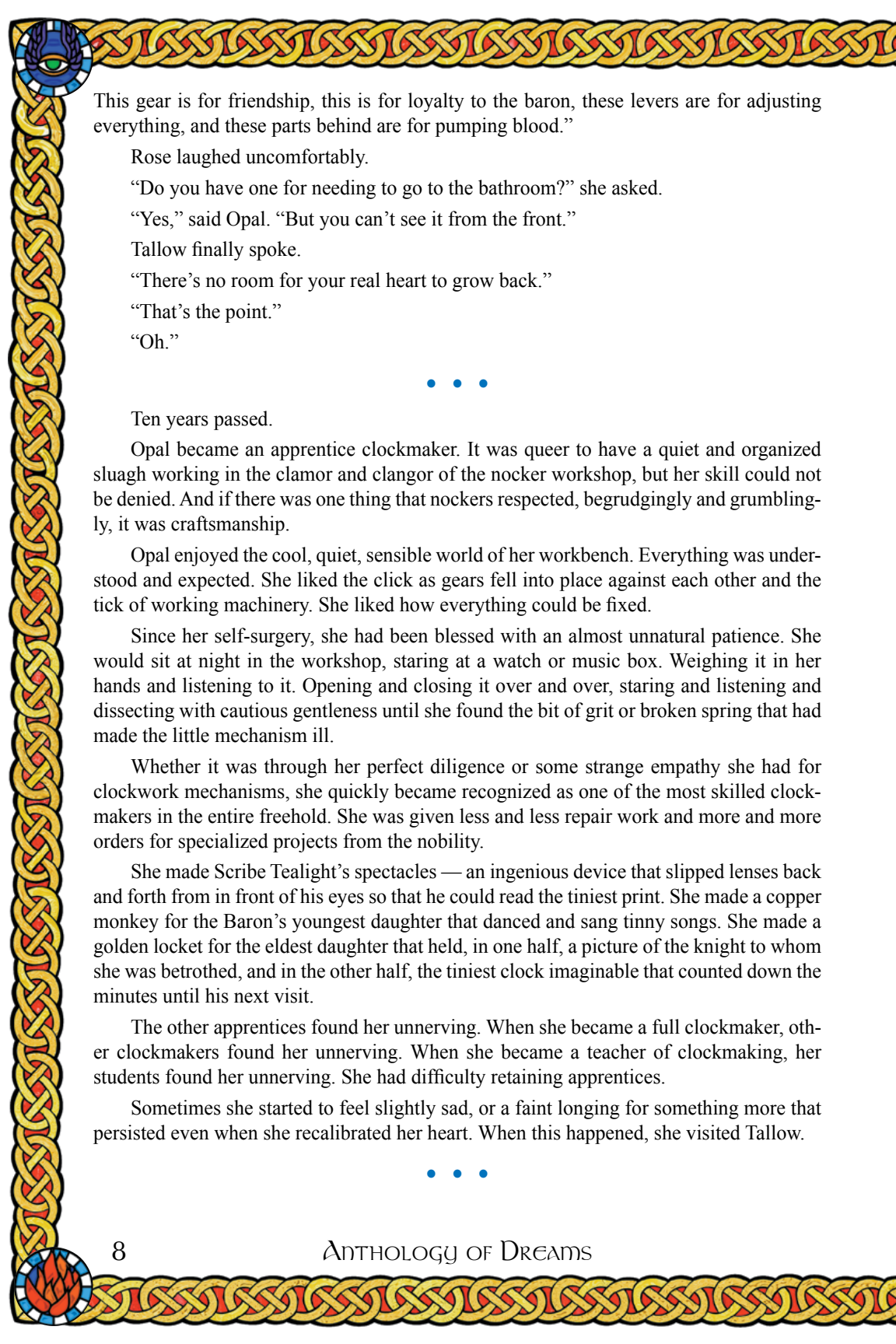
"Doesn't it hurt?" Rose asked eventually.

"It did." Opal nodded. "But not anymore."

"Holy shit," said Beeswax. He stepped around his instrument and knelt in front of Opal. He pointed to a brass cog. "What does this do?"

"It is for wanting food and drink," Opal said, and then pointed to a slender, silver spring. "This is for wanting sleep. I made it a bit smaller. I find that lets me get more done."





This gear is for friendship, this is for loyalty to the baron, these levers are for adjusting everything, and these parts behind are for pumping blood.”

Rose laughed uncomfortably.

“Do you have one for needing to go to the bathroom?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Opal. “But you can’t see it from the front.”

Tallow finally spoke.

“There’s no room for your real heart to grow back.”

“That’s the point.”

“Oh.”

• • •

Ten years passed.

Opal became an apprentice clockmaker. It was queer to have a quiet and organized slugh working in the clamor and clangor of the nocker workshop, but her skill could not be denied. And if there was one thing thatnockers respected, begrudgingly and grumblingly, it was craftsmanship.

Opal enjoyed the cool, quiet, sensible world of her workbench. Everything was understood and expected. She liked the click as gears fell into place against each other and the tick of working machinery. She liked how everything could be fixed.

Since her self-surgery, she had been blessed with an almost unnatural patience. She would sit at night in the workshop, staring at a watch or music box. Weighing it in her hands and listening to it. Opening and closing it over and over, staring and listening and dissecting with cautious gentleness until she found the bit of grit or broken spring that had made the little mechanism ill.

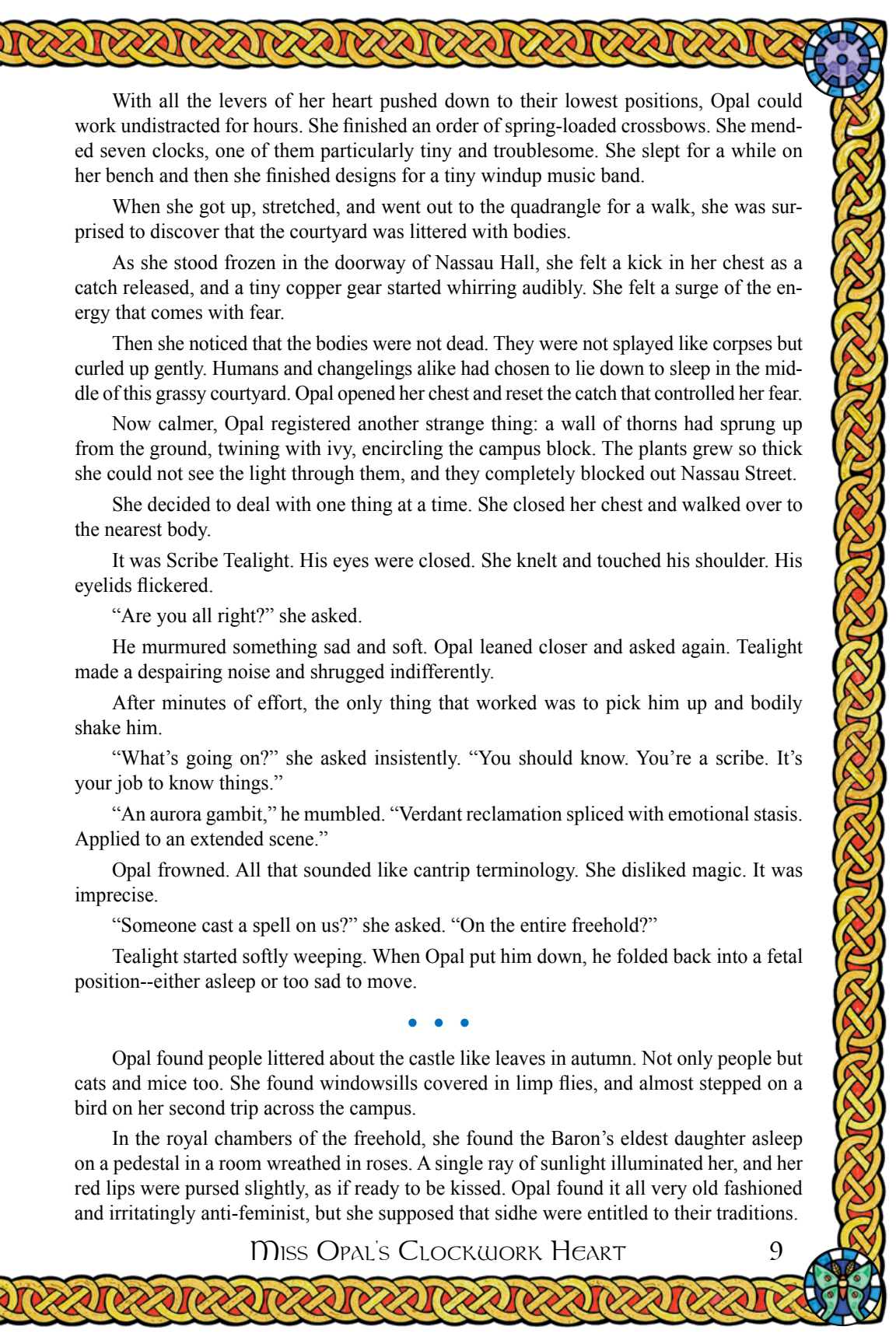
Whether it was through her perfect diligence or some strange empathy she had for clockwork mechanisms, she quickly became recognized as one of the most skilled clockmakers in the entire freehold. She was given less and less repair work and more and more orders for specialized projects from the nobility.

She made Scribe Tealight’s spectacles — an ingenious device that slipped lenses back and forth from in front of his eyes so that he could read the tiniest print. She made a copper monkey for the Baron’s youngest daughter that danced and sang tinny songs. She made a golden locket for the eldest daughter that held, in one half, a picture of the knight to whom she was betrothed, and in the other half, the tiniest clock imaginable that counted down the minutes until his next visit.

The other apprentices found her unnerving. When she became a full clockmaker, other clockmakers found her unnerving. When she became a teacher of clockmaking, her students found her unnerving. She had difficulty retaining apprentices.

Sometimes she started to feel slightly sad, or a faint longing for something more that persisted even when she recalibrated her heart. When this happened, she visited Tallow.

• • •



With all the levers of her heart pushed down to their lowest positions, Opal could work undistracted for hours. She finished an order of spring-loaded crossbows. She mended seven clocks, one of them particularly tiny and troublesome. She slept for a while on her bench and then she finished designs for a tiny windup music band.

When she got up, stretched, and went out to the quadrangle for a walk, she was surprised to discover that the courtyard was littered with bodies.

As she stood frozen in the doorway of Nassau Hall, she felt a kick in her chest as a catch released, and a tiny copper gear started whirring audibly. She felt a surge of the energy that comes with fear.

Then she noticed that the bodies were not dead. They were not splayed like corpses but curled up gently. Humans and changelings alike had chosen to lie down to sleep in the middle of this grassy courtyard. Opal opened her chest and reset the catch that controlled her fear.

Now calmer, Opal registered another strange thing: a wall of thorns had sprung up from the ground, twining with ivy, encircling the campus block. The plants grew so thick she could not see the light through them, and they completely blocked out Nassau Street.

She decided to deal with one thing at a time. She closed her chest and walked over to the nearest body.

It was Scribe Tealight. His eyes were closed. She knelt and touched his shoulder. His eyelids flickered.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

He murmured something sad and soft. Opal leaned closer and asked again. Tealight made a despairing noise and shrugged indifferently.

After minutes of effort, the only thing that worked was to pick him up and bodily shake him.

“What’s going on?” she asked insistently. “You should know. You’re a scribe. It’s your job to know things.”

“An aurora gambit,” he mumbled. “Verdant reclamation spliced with emotional stasis. Applied to an extended scene.”

Opal frowned. All that sounded like cantrip terminology. She disliked magic. It was imprecise.

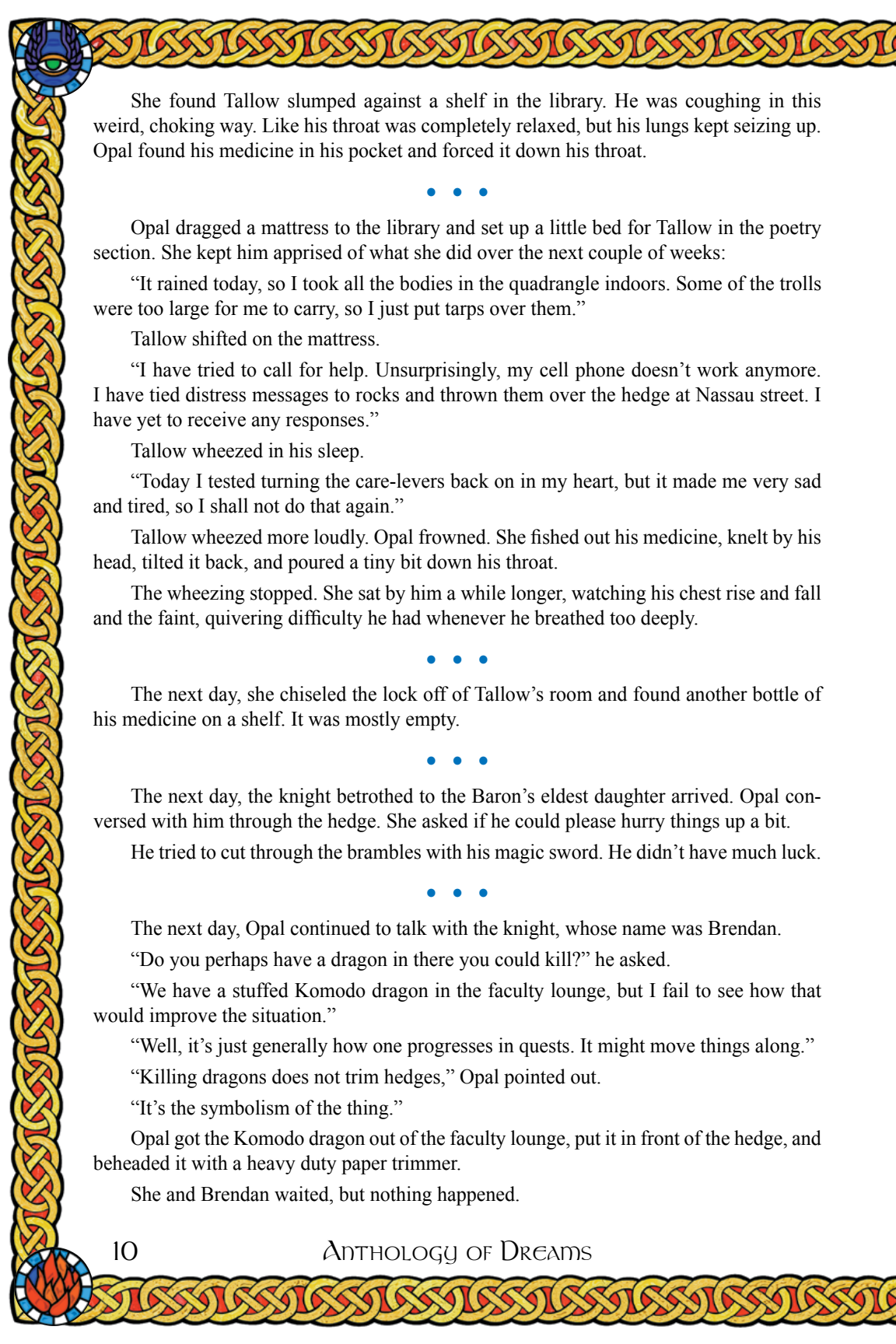
“Someone cast a spell on us?” she asked. “On the entire freehold?”

Tealight started softly weeping. When Opal put him down, he folded back into a fetal position—either asleep or too sad to move.

• • •

Opal found people littered about the castle like leaves in autumn. Not only people but cats and mice too. She found windowsills covered in limp flies, and almost stepped on a bird on her second trip across the campus.

In the royal chambers of the freehold, she found the Baron’s eldest daughter asleep on a pedestal in a room wreathed in roses. A single ray of sunlight illuminated her, and her red lips were pursed slightly, as if ready to be kissed. Opal found it all very old fashioned and irritatingly anti-feminist, but she supposed that sidhe were entitled to their traditions.



She found Tallow slumped against a shelf in the library. He was coughing in this weird, choking way. Like his throat was completely relaxed, but his lungs kept seizing up. Opal found his medicine in his pocket and forced it down his throat.

• • •

Opal dragged a mattress to the library and set up a little bed for Tallow in the poetry section. She kept him apprised of what she did over the next couple of weeks:

“It rained today, so I took all the bodies in the quadrangle indoors. Some of the trolls were too large for me to carry, so I just put tarps over them.”

Tallow shifted on the mattress.

“I have tried to call for help. Unsurprisingly, my cell phone doesn’t work anymore. I have tied distress messages to rocks and thrown them over the hedge at Nassau street. I have yet to receive any responses.”

Tallow wheezed in his sleep.

“Today I tested turning the care-levers back on in my heart, but it made me very sad and tired, so I shall not do that again.”

Tallow wheezed more loudly. Opal frowned. She fished out his medicine, knelt by his head, tilted it back, and poured a tiny bit down his throat.

The wheezing stopped. She sat by him a while longer, watching his chest rise and fall and the faint, quivering difficulty he had whenever he breathed too deeply.

• • •

The next day, she chiseled the lock off of Tallow’s room and found another bottle of his medicine on a shelf. It was mostly empty.

• • •

The next day, the knight betrothed to the Baron’s eldest daughter arrived. Opal conversed with him through the hedge. She asked if he could please hurry things up a bit.

He tried to cut through the brambles with his magic sword. He didn’t have much luck.

• • •

The next day, Opal continued to talk with the knight, whose name was Brendan.

“Do you perhaps have a dragon in there you could kill?” he asked.

“We have a stuffed Komodo dragon in the faculty lounge, but I fail to see how that would improve the situation.”

“Well, it’s just generally how one progresses in quests. It might move things along.”

“Killing dragons does not trim hedges,” Opal pointed out.

“It’s the symbolism of the thing.”

Opal got the Komodo dragon out of the faculty lounge, put it in front of the hedge, and beheaded it with a heavy duty paper trimmer.

She and Brendan waited, but nothing happened.





“Maybe try a manticore,” Brendan suggested. “Do you have any manticores in there?”

“I am done exploring this avenue of potential solutions,” said Opal.



“Are the mortals reacting to this at all?” Opal asked Brendan the next day. “The giant hedge, and being unable to enter Princeton University?”

“Not really. They’re kind of squinting at it, and then doing other things.”

“Hmm. Well. I suppose calling the fire department won’t help then.”



“I need you to run an errand,” Opal told Brendan the next day.

“I am a bit busy with a quest,” Brendan reminded her.

“It’s urgent. It’s medicine for my friend.”

“Oh.”

“The pharmacy across the street should have it. Tell the pharmacist it’s for Tallow.”

Brendan went and got the medicine. He wrapped it in a Princeton sweatshirt to protect it and tossed it over the hedge.

As the medicine arced over the bramble, a vine shot up, snagged it, and crushed it.

Opal stared up at the hedge for a long moment.

“Well. At least now I know what happened to my distress rocks,” she said.



The next day, Opal broke the lock off a garden shed. She was getting good at breaking and entering.

She found garden shears, which did nothing to the hedge.

She found a lawn mower, which broke over the hedge.

She found a riding mower parked in the back. She turned the key in the ignition, rigged the gas pedal with a trigger mechanism, jumped out, and pulled the trigger. The mower hurtled into the hedge.

The hedge ate it.

Opal had to readjust her heart twice to keep from screaming.




The next day, Opal ran out of medicine.

She knew that this was the moment. The moment when panic over her friend’s life would drive her towards some inspired frenzy, and give her the mad idea she needed to destroy the hedge and save his life. That was how stories worked. That was how the Dreaming worked.

She poured the last dose down his throat and waited.

She didn’t feel anything.



But then, *of course* she didn't feel anything! Her feelings were turned completely down to avoid the paralyzing sadness enchanting the freehold! She needed to feel afraid for Tallow's life, but not cripplingly, magically depressed. She would find a way to do that. She would hack her heart. She opened up her chest began to fiddle frantically.

It took longer than she wanted, but she discovered that if she drank a lot of coffee and hooked up her heart to Ashcat, Rose, and Beeswax while ranting at them about how Tallow was about to die, she could panic without exposing her emotions to the stasis spell.

And then she had it.

Her brilliant, desperate idea.

• • •

Brendan was sitting on a bench, staring irritably at the giant hedge that separated him from his true love.

Stupid hedge. Give him a good dragon, any day. Something he could sink his sword into. He'd tried to use his sword on it. The vines had grabbed at it while the branches he'd cut grew back. The soft-spoken woman, who he could barely hear through the hedge, had told him to stop before he lost the weapon.

Beyond the hedge, the clock tower started chiming.

Brendan felt like he should be working on some clever plan to get through the hedge. But he had this irksome feeling that the soft-spoken woman was a lot smarter than him and that her clever plans would be better than his, so what was the point? Of course, that might just be the depression magic leaking through the hedge.

The clock tower was still chiming. Which was odd. According to the clock tower, it seemed to be...twenty-four o'clock? And was the chiming getting closer?

The middle of the hedge exploded in a whirlwind of blades.

Brendan jumped to his feet and lunged to grab two unsuspecting mortals and snatch them away from the blades and thrashing vines. He pushed them behind him, drawing his sword and turning to face the monster emerging from the hedge.

It was the Nassau clock tower. The green cupola mounted on mechanical spider legs. Its faces spun — their arms elongated and sharpened into swords. Between the pillars, gears rotated in and out at vicious speeds, their edges sharpened into razors. The many blades cut through leaves and vines faster than they could grow back, slicing their way to freedom.

But then the root system got involved. Fibrous tendrils erupted from the ground, lashing around the delicate spider legs and dragging the tower to the ground. A huge taproot, too thick to cut, began to coil around and drag the entire apparatus back in.

Brendan didn't hesitate. He ran and jumped, dodging deadly clock hands, and landing on top of the cupola. From within he could hear muffled cursing elaborate enough to do any nocker proud. They were all dragged back through the hedge.

• • •

Opal was still swearing as Brendan broke open the cupola to get her out. She stopped the instant she saw him.

“You,” she exclaimed. “You’re inside.”

“Thanks to you,” Brendan said, smiling.

“We need to get you to the noble chambers at once. You can kiss your true love and break the spell. That should destroy the hedge.”

“I suppose it should. But is there a reason you’re in such a hurry?”

“I’m out of medicine. My friend is dying.”

“Oh. God. Right then. Rush.”

They ran across the courtyard towards Nassau Hall. At first, Opal had trouble keeping up with his long strides, but with every step, Brendan became slower and slower.

“Brendan?”

He stumbled to a stop, ten feet from the door, and fell to his knees. His face a mask of weary sadness.

“No,” Opal said, pulling at his arm. “Not you too. You have to get up. You have to go kiss her.”

“I...just have to stop for a minute,” Brendan murmured.

“You love her! Isn’t love stronger than this? Doesn’t love break spells? Isn’t that the point?!”

Brendan didn’t respond. Opal tugged on his arm, trying to haul him bodily towards the hall. But he was twice her size, and she couldn’t move him at all.

Then, realizing what she needed to do, she grabbed his sword. Midway through trying to unsheathe it she changed her mind and instead went for the dagger whose hilt peeked out of his boot. She stabbed him in the chest.

She had to carve a hole and break one of his ribs to do it, but eventually, she pried his still-beating heart out of his body. Quick as she could, she unlatched her own heart, hooked the copper wires to his veins, and clipped the metal clamp onto his rib.

The empty ache in her own chest was unbearable. She thrust Brendan’s heart into the empty space. That made it better, but only for a moment. A sadness settled on her soul. A debilitating, soul-sucking depression that sent her toppling to the ground.

She had already fallen into a deep sleep by the time Brendan began to move.

• • •

“Miss Opal?”

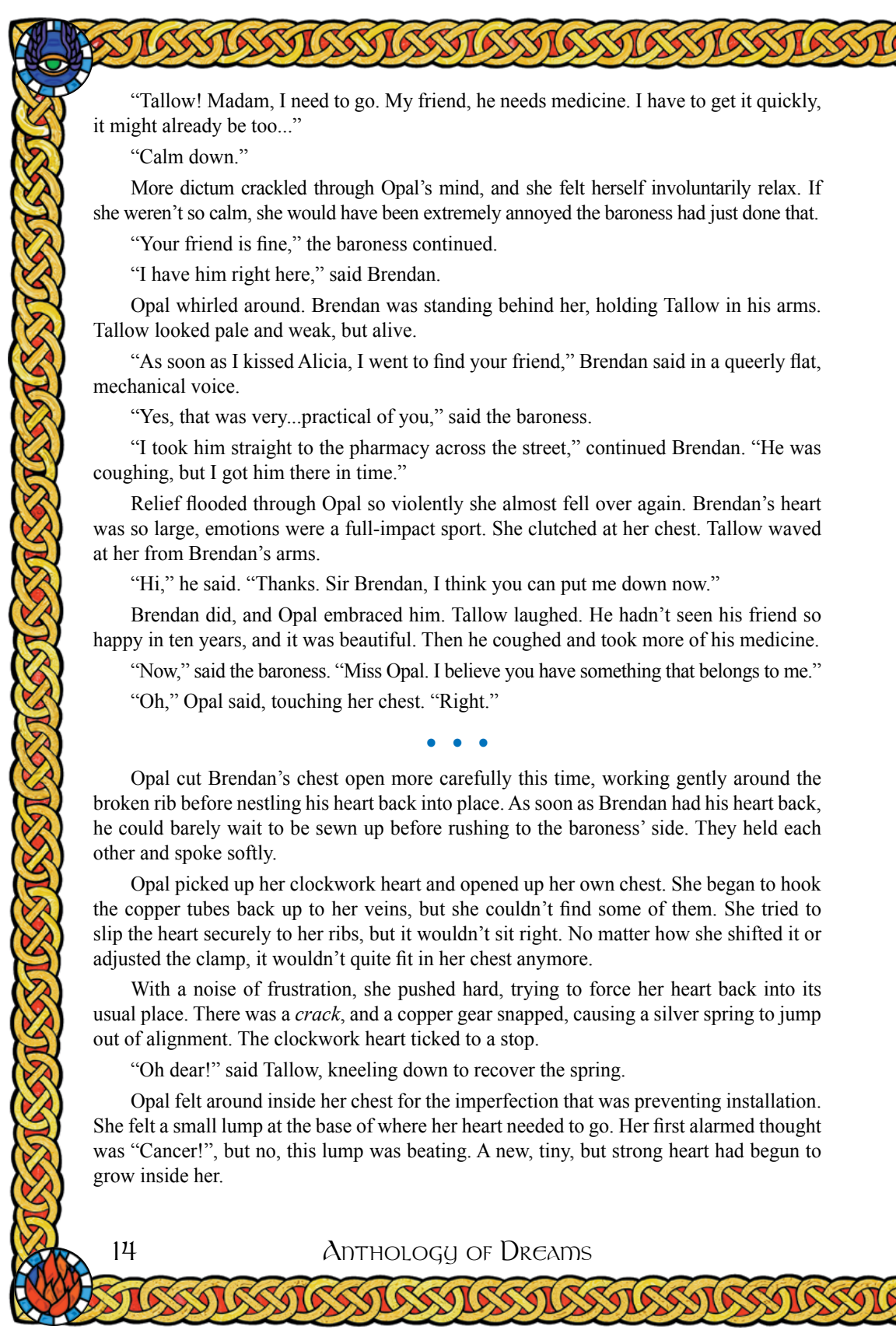
Opal stirred.

“Miss Opal. Wake up.”

The power of dictum played down Opal’s synapses, and the magic-infused order roused her from sleep. She opened her eyes and looked up. The Baron’s eldest daughter stood over her. The tall and stately Sidhe smiled.

It took Opal a few bleary seconds to piece together the situation. Why she’d been asleep. What it meant that the baroness was awake. When she fully remembered what was going on the heart in Opal’s chest lurched and she stumbled to her feet.





“Tallow! Madam, I need to go. My friend, he needs medicine. I have to get it quickly, it might already be too...”

“Calm down.”

More dictum crackled through Opal’s mind, and she felt herself involuntarily relax. If she weren’t so calm, she would have been extremely annoyed the baroness had just done that.

“Your friend is fine,” the baroness continued.

“I have him right here,” said Brendan.

Opal whirled around. Brendan was standing behind her, holding Tallow in his arms. Tallow looked pale and weak, but alive.

“As soon as I kissed Alicia, I went to find your friend,” Brendan said in a queerly flat, mechanical voice.

“Yes, that was very...practical of you,” said the baroness.

“I took him straight to the pharmacy across the street,” continued Brendan. “He was coughing, but I got him there in time.”

Relief flooded through Opal so violently she almost fell over again. Brendan’s heart was so large, emotions were a full-impact sport. She clutched at her chest. Tallow waved at her from Brendan’s arms.

“Hi,” he said. “Thanks. Sir Brendan, I think you can put me down now.”

Brendan did, and Opal embraced him. Tallow laughed. He hadn’t seen his friend so happy in ten years, and it was beautiful. Then he coughed and took more of his medicine.

“Now,” said the baroness. “Miss Opal. I believe you have something that belongs to me.”

“Oh,” Opal said, touching her chest. “Right.”

• • •

Opal cut Brendan’s chest open more carefully this time, working gently around the broken rib before nestling his heart back into place. As soon as Brendan had his heart back, he could barely wait to be sewn up before rushing to the baroness’ side. They held each other and spoke softly.

Opal picked up her clockwork heart and opened up her own chest. She began to hook the copper tubes back up to her veins, but she couldn’t find some of them. She tried to slip the heart securely to her ribs, but it wouldn’t sit right. No matter how she shifted it or adjusted the clamp, it wouldn’t quite fit in her chest anymore.

With a noise of frustration, she pushed hard, trying to force her heart back into its usual place. There was a *crack*, and a copper gear snapped, causing a silver spring to jump out of alignment. The clockwork heart ticked to a stop.

“Oh dear!” said Tallow, kneeling down to recover the spring.

Opal felt around inside her chest for the imperfection that was preventing installation. She felt a small lump at the base of where her heart needed to go. Her first alarmed thought was “Cancer!”, but no, this lump was beating. A new, tiny, but strong heart had begun to grow inside her.

“This is your fault,” she told Tallow, pointing at the lump. “I was so worried about you, I was so afraid, it must have stimulated growth, and this sprouted as soon as my chest was empty. And now, look at this!” She waved her damaged clockwork masterpiece in his face. “It won’t fit anymore! And the gears are ruined. You’ve broken my heart.”

Tallow smiled.

“I’m terribly glad.”





# ONE FOR SORROW, TWO FOR JOY

*By Nathan Dorey*

In the early days, before the white people brought their dreams to Australia, the bush boasted many fig trees. Thin and weak, the little saplings desperately clung to the skin of larger trees. Thus sheltered, strengthened, and shielded from the sun's cruel rays — they put down deep, strong roots.

And so they grew. In time they became mighty giants, overshadowing all their neighbors. Branches entwining around the other trees like lovers, they slowly smothered the life right out of everything around them. Their greedy roots sucked up the dirt's sweet nutrients as fast as they could, leaving nothing for the others.

The other trees died. The fig trees grew.

They didn't stop there; they enveloped their victims, busily snaking around and through and *inside* the now-withered husks. They claimed them, made the dead trees *part* of them. Soon enough these mighty beasts, these tangles of living plant and corpse, were everywhere.

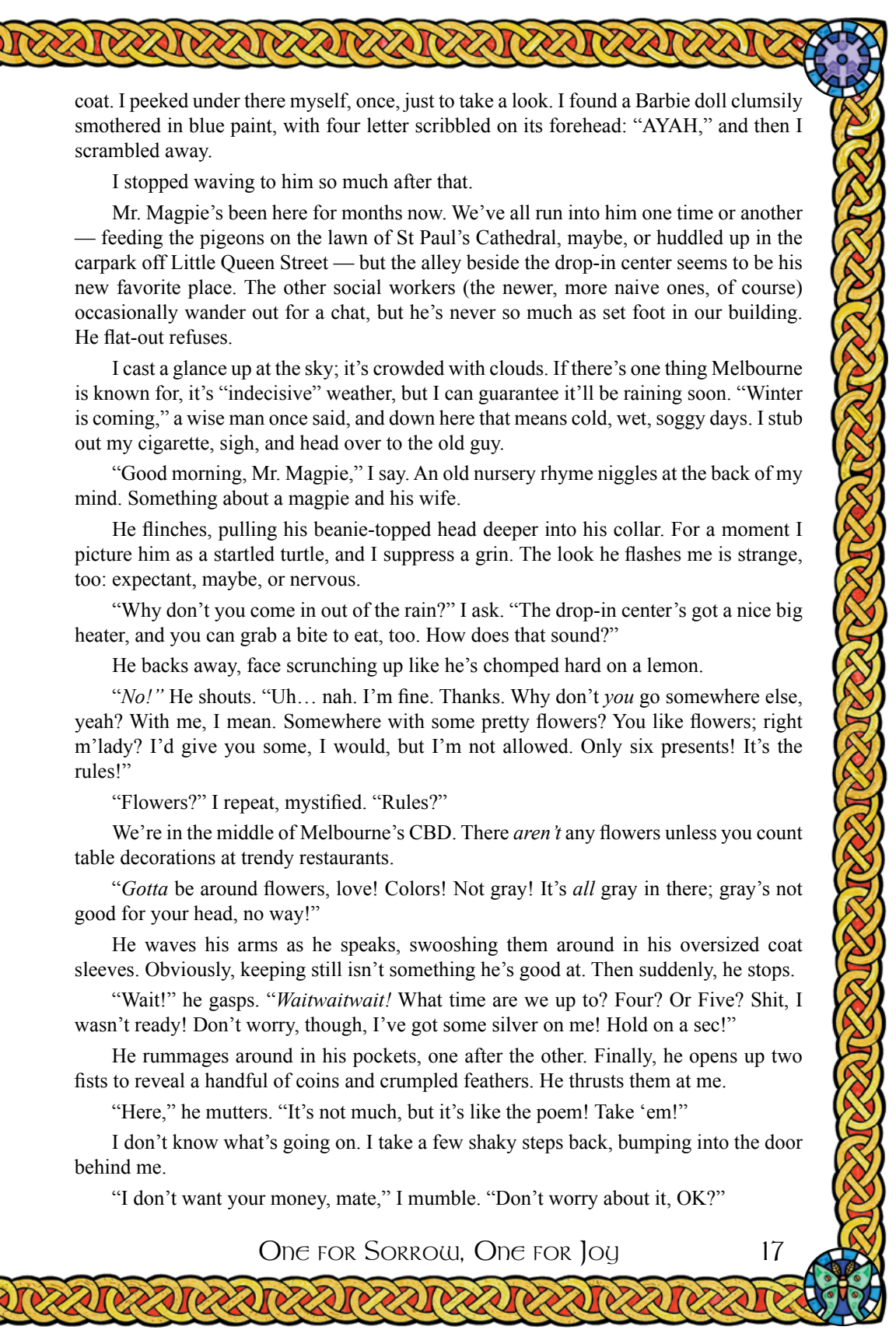
When the Europeans arrived, they were shocked. "Even the trees kill each other here!" they cried. They wrote about them in their many journals and sketched them in their letters back home, and they called them Strangler Figs.

The Europeans didn't know — and never would have dreamed! — that faeries lived inside the Strangler Figs. Perched high in their gnarled branches, little red men listened to the white people's tales, and their toothless mouths opened into big, wicked smiles.

• • •

Mr. Magpie is in the alley again. I think he lives there. He has a stash that he leaves under a dumpster for safe keeping. Every now and then, when I'm out having a smoke, I'll see him shimmy under and retrieve something: a bag of bread rolls, maybe, or an extra





coat. I peeked under there myself, once, just to take a look. I found a Barbie doll clumsily smothered in blue paint, with four letter scribbled on its forehead: “AYAH,” and then I scrambled away.

I stopped waving to him so much after that.

Mr. Magpie’s been here for months now. We’ve all run into him one time or another — feeding the pigeons on the lawn of St Paul’s Cathedral, maybe, or huddled up in the carpark off Little Queen Street — but the alley beside the drop-in center seems to be his new favorite place. The other social workers (the newer, more naive ones, of course) occasionally wander out for a chat, but he’s never so much as set foot in our building. He flat-out refuses.

I cast a glance up at the sky; it’s crowded with clouds. If there’s one thing Melbourne is known for, it’s “indecisive” weather, but I can guarantee it’ll be raining soon. “Winter is coming,” a wise man once said, and down here that means cold, wet, soggy days. I stub out my cigarette, sigh, and head over to the old guy.

“Good morning, Mr. Magpie,” I say. An old nursery rhyme niggles at the back of my mind. Something about a magpie and his wife.

He flinches, pulling his beanie-topped head deeper into his collar. For a moment I picture him as a startled turtle, and I suppress a grin. The look he flashes me is strange, too: expectant, maybe, or nervous.

“Why don’t you come in out of the rain?” I ask. “The drop-in center’s got a nice big heater, and you can grab a bite to eat, too. How does that sound?”

He backs away, face scrunching up like he’s chomped hard on a lemon.

“No!” He shouts. “Uh... nah. I’m fine. Thanks. Why don’t *you* go somewhere else, yeah? With me, I mean. Somewhere with some pretty flowers? You like flowers; right m’lady? I’d give you some, I would, but I’m not allowed. Only six presents! It’s the rules!”

“Flowers?” I repeat, mystified. “Rules?”

We’re in the middle of Melbourne’s CBD. There *aren’t* any flowers unless you count table decorations at trendy restaurants.

“Gotta be around flowers, love! Colors! Not gray! It’s *all* gray in there; gray’s not good for your head, no way!”

He waves his arms as he speaks, swooshing them around in his oversized coat sleeves. Obviously, keeping still isn’t something he’s good at. Then suddenly, he stops.

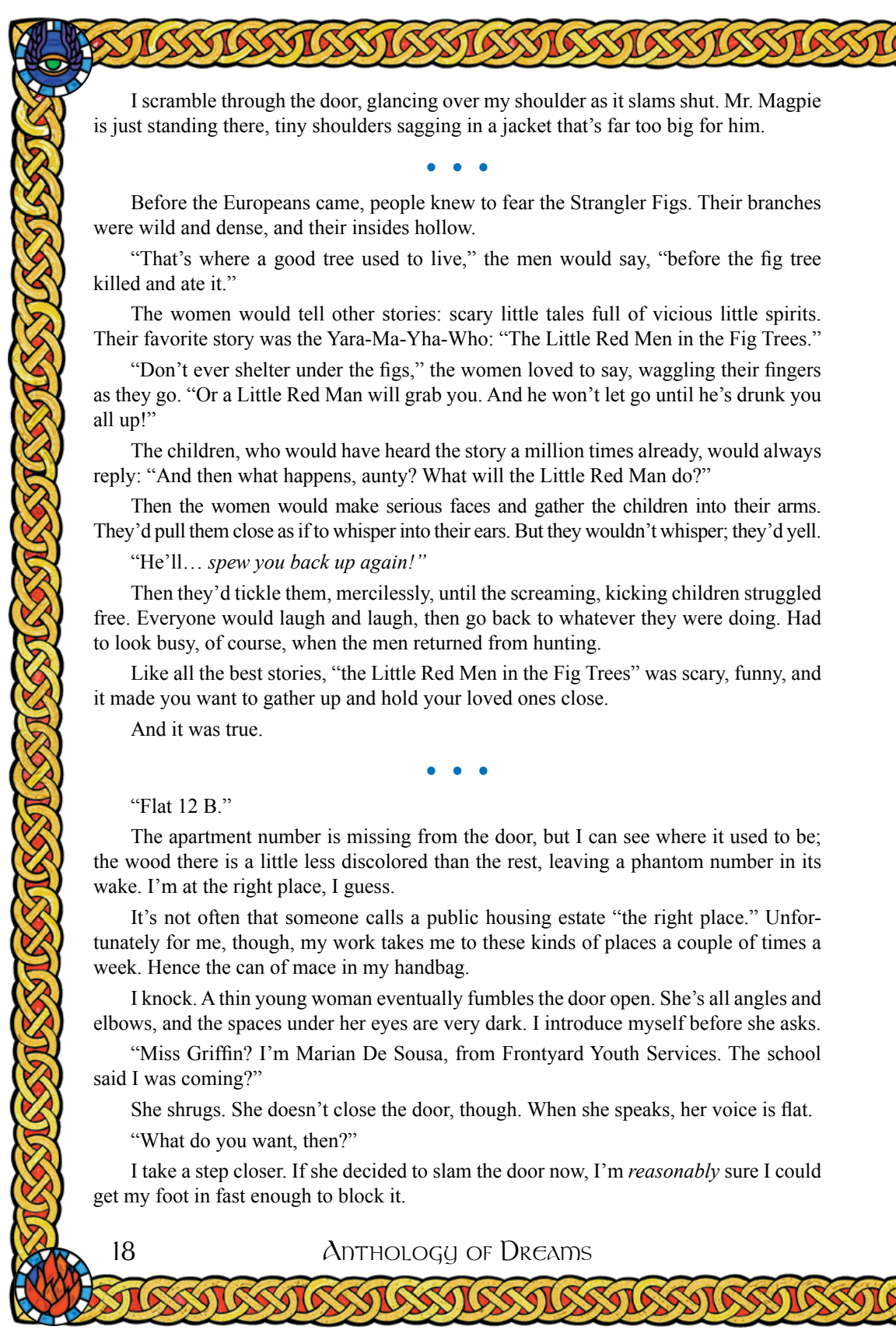
“Wait!” he gasps. “*Waitwaitwait!* What time are we up to? Four? Or Five? Shit, I wasn’t ready! Don’t worry, though, I’ve got some silver on me! Hold on a sec!”

He rummages around in his pockets, one after the other. Finally, he opens up two fists to reveal a handful of coins and crumpled feathers. He thrusts them at me.

“Here,” he mutters. “It’s not much, but it’s like the poem! Take ‘em!”

I don’t know what’s going on. I take a few shaky steps back, bumping into the door behind me.

“I don’t want your money, mate,” I mumble. “Don’t worry about it, OK?”



I scramble through the door, glancing over my shoulder as it slams shut. Mr. Magpie is just standing there, tiny shoulders sagging in a jacket that's far too big for him.

• • •

Before the Europeans came, people knew to fear the Strangler Figs. Their branches were wild and dense, and their insides hollow.

"That's where a good tree used to live," the men would say, "before the fig tree killed and ate it."

The women would tell other stories: scary little tales full of vicious little spirits. Their favorite story was the Yara-Ma-Yha-Who: "The Little Red Men in the Fig Trees."

"Don't ever shelter under the figs," the women loved to say, wagging their fingers as they go. "Or a Little Red Man will grab you. And he won't let go until he's drunk you all up!"

The children, who would have heard the story a million times already, would always reply: "And then what happens, aunty? What will the Little Red Man do?"

Then the women would make serious faces and gather the children into their arms. They'd pull them close as if to whisper into their ears. But they wouldn't whisper; they'd yell.

"He'll... *spew you back up again!*"

Then they'd tickle them, mercilessly, until the screaming, kicking children struggled free. Everyone would laugh and laugh, then go back to whatever they were doing. Had to look busy, of course, when the men returned from hunting.

Like all the best stories, "the Little Red Men in the Fig Trees" was scary, funny, and it made you want to gather up and hold your loved ones close.

And it was true.

• • •

"Flat 12 B."

The apartment number is missing from the door, but I can see where it used to be; the wood there is a little less discolored than the rest, leaving a phantom number in its wake. I'm at the right place, I guess.

It's not often that someone calls a public housing estate "the right place." Unfortunately for me, though, my work takes me to these kinds of places a couple of times a week. Hence the can of mace in my handbag.

I knock. A thin young woman eventually fumbles the door open. She's all angles and elbows, and the spaces under her eyes are very dark. I introduce myself before she asks.

"Miss Griffin? I'm Marian De Sousa, from Frontyard Youth Services. The school said I was coming?"

She shrugs. She doesn't close the door, though. When she speaks, her voice is flat.

"What do you want, then?"

I take a step closer. If she decided to slam the door now, I'm *reasonably* sure I could get my foot in fast enough to block it.

"It's about your son, Harry, and what happened last week."

She leads me into her living room without a word, then collapses onto a couch. It's a very small room — the whole flat could charitably be called a shoebox — but it's packed with enough furniture for a much larger space. I place a manila folder onto the coffee table, sweeping aside some mugs and empty bottles to make room. I open it up, then fan out the slips of paper within. All the while, I'm trying my hardest not to actually look at any of them. Not again.

"Miss Griffin... can I call you Stephanie?"

"Steph," she murmurs. "Everyone calls me Steph."

"OK, Steph. Well, there have been some... concerns about Harry's behavior for a little while, now. Some of the things he's made in art class, some of the games he's been playing at lunch. The principal has asked me to come and have a bit of a chat with you both. Is he here right now?"

Steph, already tuning me out, leans over to get a better look at the papers.

"Harry's at the park right now. He—" She stops mid-sentence. "What? What *is* this? What the *fuck* is this?"

She snatches them up and starts rifling through them. She stops at one particularly detailed picture: an angry red blob with long arms and a big, black circle for a mouth.

"That little demon figure shows up in a lot of his drawings," I say, intently examining an old McDonalds wrapper beside me. "Apparently Harry calls him 'the red man.' He lives in the closet and likes to drink blood. Apparently, that's who he was pretending to be when he bit Mia Nguyen last week."

Stephanie makes a strange noise, a little like a hiccup, and when I look over I can see her eyes are wet. I continue my little spiel; I rehearsed the whole drive here, after all.

"Obviously, an incident like that, the school needs to step in and make sure everything is all right. At home, I mean."

This is the part of the job I hate. Don't get me wrong; it's rewarding as all hell, helping people out of some pretty dark situations. But sometimes, when you're the one telling them that it's about to get *worse*... well, it's a real kick in the guts. There's a reason social workers drink so much.

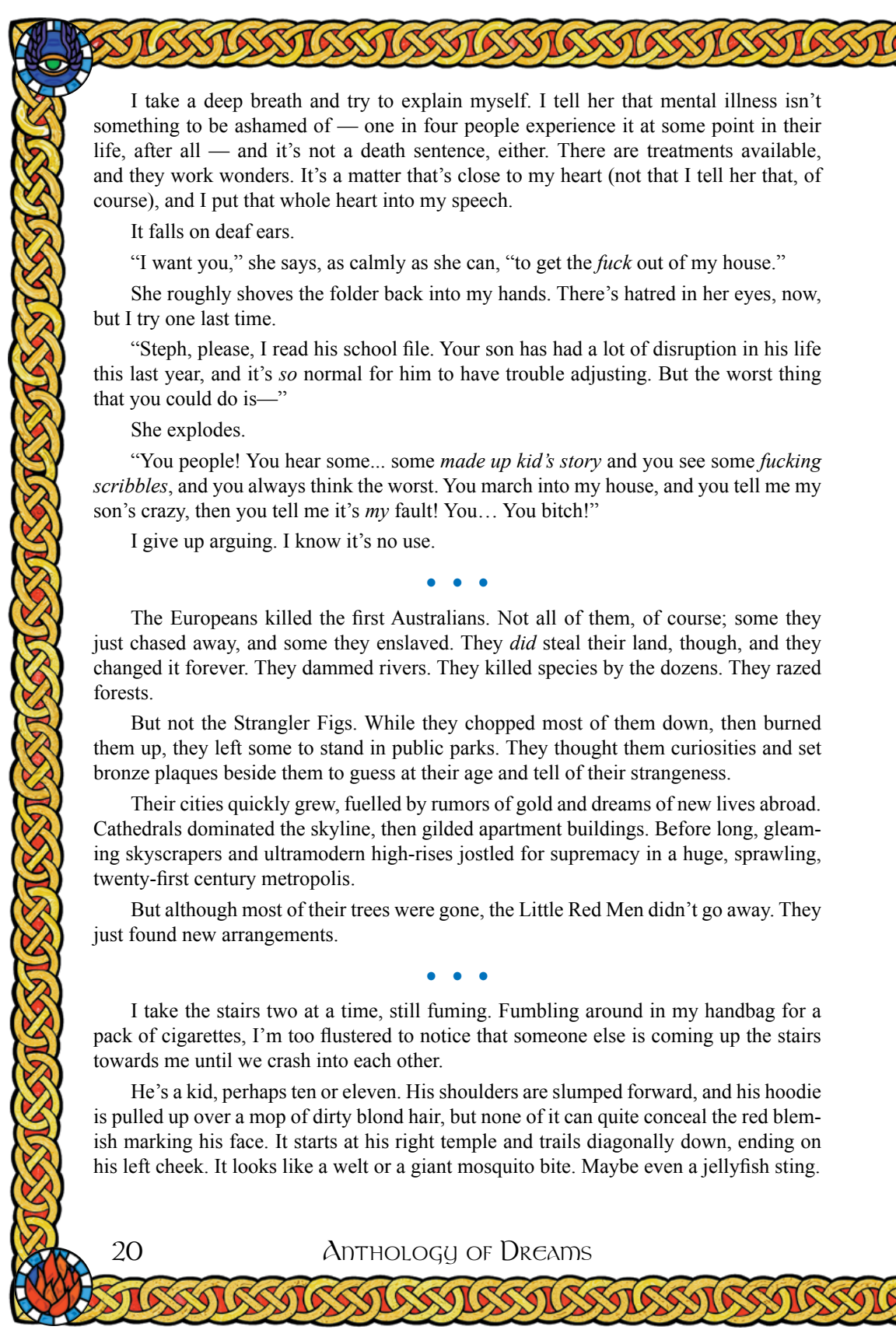
"Steph," I continue, trying to be as diplomatic as I can. "I believe that Harry could be exhibiting symptoms of mental illness. I know he's just a kid and kids have their games and what-have-you, but after his... episode... I think it would be a good idea if he spoke to a professional."

"Like *you*, you mean?"

The vitriol in her response comes as a surprise, even though I'd steeled myself for it before I even knocked on the door. Even so, the color rising in her pale cheeks makes me nervous. I don't like confrontations.

"Harry's a good boy!" she says, her voice growing louder by the second. "He's a handful, I'll give you that, but he's good. But now he gets into one fight, and suddenly the vultures are all here, trying to get their pound of flesh. He's just a boy, for fuck's sake! Just a *kid*!"





I take a deep breath and try to explain myself. I tell her that mental illness isn't something to be ashamed of — one in four people experience it at some point in their life, after all — and it's not a death sentence, either. There are treatments available, and they work wonders. It's a matter that's close to my heart (not that I tell her that, of course), and I put that whole heart into my speech.

It falls on deaf ears.

"I want you," she says, as calmly as she can, "to get the *fuck* out of my house."

She roughly shoves the folder back into my hands. There's hatred in her eyes, now, but I try one last time.

"Steph, please, I read his school file. Your son has had a lot of disruption in his life this last year, and it's *so* normal for him to have trouble adjusting. But the worst thing that you could do is—"

She explodes.

"You people! You hear some... some *made up kid's story* and you see some *fucking scribbles*, and you always think the worst. You march into my house, and you tell me my son's crazy, then you tell me it's *my* fault! You... You bitch!"

I give up arguing. I know it's no use.

• • •

The Europeans killed the first Australians. Not all of them, of course; some they just chased away, and some they enslaved. They *did* steal their land, though, and they changed it forever. They dammed rivers. They killed species by the dozens. They razed forests.

But not the Strangler Figs. While they chopped most of them down, then burned them up, they left some to stand in public parks. They thought them curiosities and set bronze plaques beside them to guess at their age and tell of their strangeness.

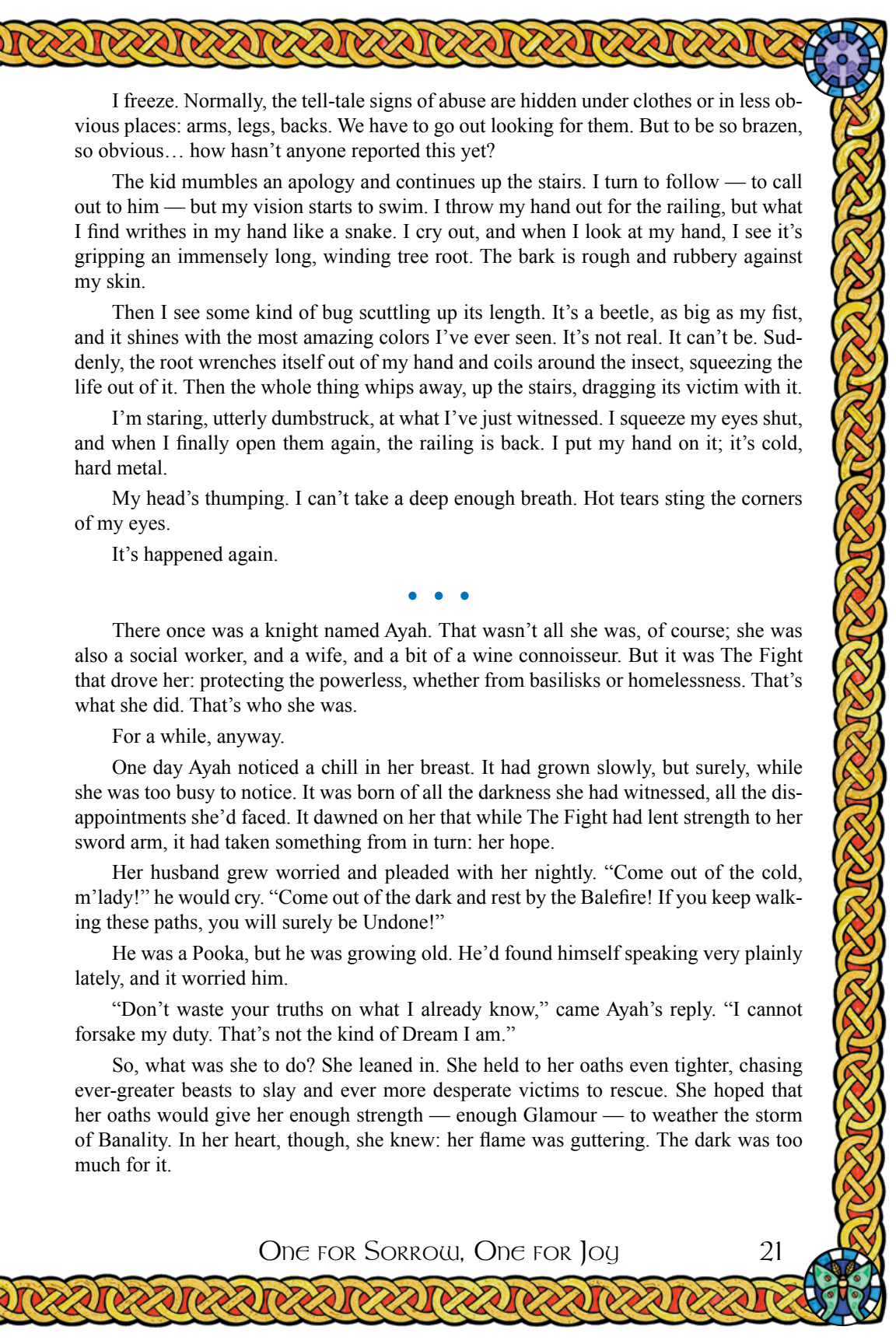
Their cities quickly grew, fuelled by rumors of gold and dreams of new lives abroad. Cathedrals dominated the skyline, then gilded apartment buildings. Before long, gleaming skyscrapers and ultramodern high-rises jostled for supremacy in a huge, sprawling, twenty-first century metropolis.

But although most of their trees were gone, the Little Red Men didn't go away. They just found new arrangements.

• • •

I take the stairs two at a time, still fuming. Fumbling around in my handbag for a pack of cigarettes, I'm too flustered to notice that someone else is coming up the stairs towards me until we crash into each other.

He's a kid, perhaps ten or eleven. His shoulders are slumped forward, and his hoodie is pulled up over a mop of dirty blond hair, but none of it can quite conceal the red blemish marking his face. It starts at his right temple and trails diagonally down, ending on his left cheek. It looks like a welt or a giant mosquito bite. Maybe even a jellyfish sting.



I freeze. Normally, the tell-tale signs of abuse are hidden under clothes or in less obvious places: arms, legs, backs. We have to go out looking for them. But to be so brazen, so obvious... how hasn't anyone reported this yet?

The kid mumbles an apology and continues up the stairs. I turn to follow — to call out to him — but my vision starts to swim. I throw my hand out for the railing, but what I find writhes in my hand like a snake. I cry out, and when I look at my hand, I see it's gripping an immensely long, winding tree root. The bark is rough and rubbery against my skin.

Then I see some kind of bug scuttling up its length. It's a beetle, as big as my fist, and it shines with the most amazing colors I've ever seen. It's not real. It can't be. Suddenly, the root wrenches itself out of my hand and coils around the insect, squeezing the life out of it. Then the whole thing whips away, up the stairs, dragging its victim with it.

I'm staring, utterly dumbstruck, at what I've just witnessed. I squeeze my eyes shut, and when I finally open them again, the railing is back. I put my hand on it; it's cold, hard metal.

My head's thumping. I can't take a deep enough breath. Hot tears sting the corners of my eyes.

It's happened again.

• • •

There once was a knight named Ayah. That wasn't all she was, of course; she was also a social worker, and a wife, and a bit of a wine connoisseur. But it was The Fight that drove her: protecting the powerless, whether from basilisks or homelessness. That's what she did. That's who she was.

For a while, anyway.

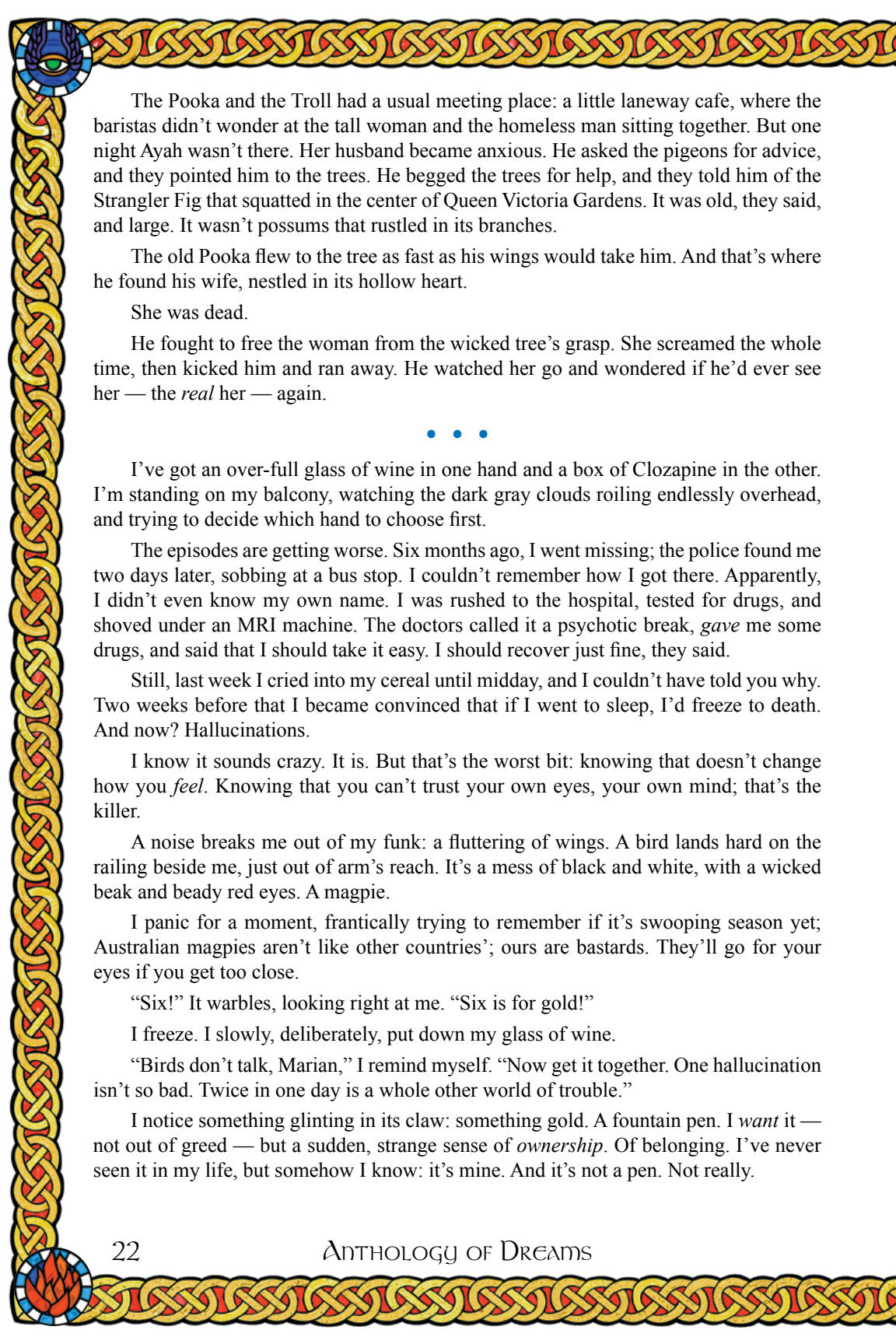
One day Ayah noticed a chill in her breast. It had grown slowly, but surely, while she was too busy to notice. It was born of all the darkness she had witnessed, all the disappointments she'd faced. It dawned on her that while The Fight had lent strength to her sword arm, it had taken something from in turn: her hope.

Her husband grew worried and pleaded with her nightly. "Come out of the cold, m'lady!" he would cry. "Come out of the dark and rest by the Balefire! If you keep walking these paths, you will surely be Undone!"

He was a Pooka, but he was growing old. He'd found himself speaking very plainly lately, and it worried him.

"Don't waste your truths on what I already know," came Ayah's reply. "I cannot forsake my duty. That's not the kind of Dream I am."

So, what was she to do? She leaned in. She held to her oaths even tighter, chasing ever-greater beasts to slay and ever more desperate victims to rescue. She hoped that her oaths would give her enough strength — enough Glamour — to weather the storm of Banality. In her heart, though, she knew: her flame was guttering. The dark was too much for it.



The Pooka and the Troll had a usual meeting place: a little laneway cafe, where the baristas didn't wonder at the tall woman and the homeless man sitting together. But one night Ayah wasn't there. Her husband became anxious. He asked the pigeons for advice, and they pointed him to the trees. He begged the trees for help, and they told him of the Strangler Fig that squatted in the center of Queen Victoria Gardens. It was old, they said, and large. It wasn't possums that rustled in its branches.

The old Pooka flew to the tree as fast as his wings would take him. And that's where he found his wife, nestled in its hollow heart.

She was dead.

He fought to free the woman from the wicked tree's grasp. She screamed the whole time, then kicked him and ran away. He watched her go and wondered if he'd ever see her — the *real* her — again.

• • •

I've got an over-full glass of wine in one hand and a box of Clozapine in the other. I'm standing on my balcony, watching the dark gray clouds roiling endlessly overhead, and trying to decide which hand to choose first.

The episodes are getting worse. Six months ago, I went missing; the police found me two days later, sobbing at a bus stop. I couldn't remember how I got there. Apparently, I didn't even know my own name. I was rushed to the hospital, tested for drugs, and shoved under an MRI machine. The doctors called it a psychotic break, *gave* me some drugs, and said that I should take it easy. I should recover just fine, they said.

Still, last week I cried into my cereal until midday, and I couldn't have told you why. Two weeks before that I became convinced that if I went to sleep, I'd freeze to death. And now? Hallucinations.

I know it sounds crazy. It is. But that's the worst bit: knowing that doesn't change how you *feel*. Knowing that you can't trust your own eyes, your own mind; that's the killer.

A noise breaks me out of my funk: a fluttering of wings. A bird lands hard on the railing beside me, just out of arm's reach. It's a mess of black and white, with a wicked beak and beady red eyes. A magpie.

I panic for a moment, frantically trying to remember if it's swooping season yet; Australian magpies aren't like other countries'; ours are bastards. They'll go for your eyes if you get too close.

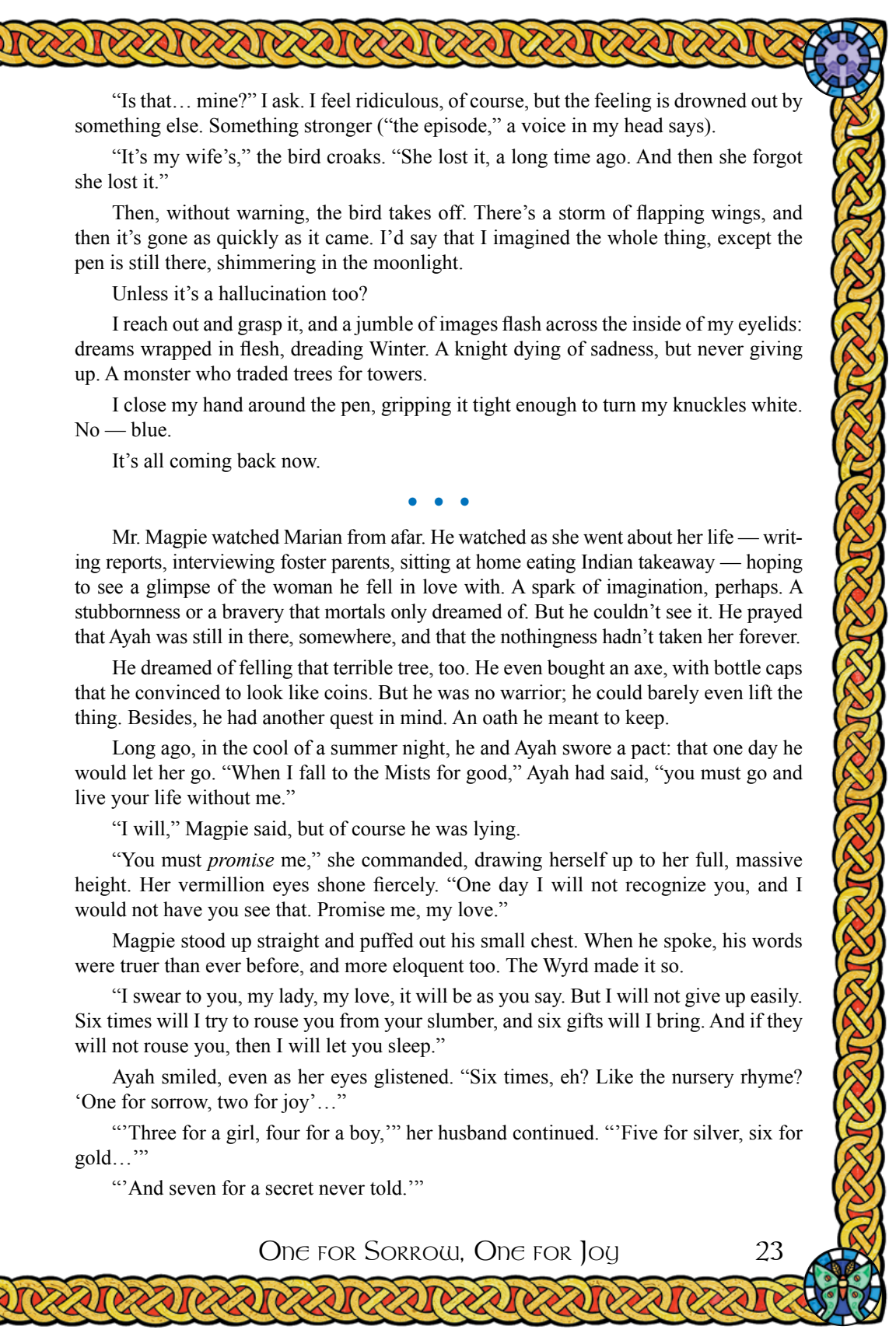
"Six!" It warbles, looking right at me. "Six is for gold!"

I freeze. I slowly, deliberately, put down my glass of wine.

"Birds don't talk, Marian," I remind myself. "Now get it together. One hallucination isn't so bad. Twice in one day is a whole other world of trouble."

I notice something glinting in its claw: something gold. A fountain pen. I *want* it — not out of greed — but a sudden, strange sense of *ownership*. Of belonging. I've never seen it in my life, but somehow I know: it's mine. And it's not a pen. Not really.





"Is that... mine?" I ask. I feel ridiculous, of course, but the feeling is drowned out by something else. Something stronger ("the episode," a voice in my head says).

"It's my wife's," the bird croaks. "She lost it, a long time ago. And then she forgot she lost it."

Then, without warning, the bird takes off. There's a storm of flapping wings, and then it's gone as quickly as it came. I'd say that I imagined the whole thing, except the pen is still there, shimmering in the moonlight.

Unless it's a hallucination too?

I reach out and grasp it, and a jumble of images flash across the inside of my eyelids: dreams wrapped in flesh, dreading Winter. A knight dying of sadness, but never giving up. A monster who traded trees for towers.

I close my hand around the pen, gripping it tight enough to turn my knuckles white. No — blue.

It's all coming back now.

• • •

Mr. Magpie watched Marian from afar. He watched as she went about her life — writing reports, interviewing foster parents, sitting at home eating Indian takeaway — hoping to see a glimpse of the woman he fell in love with. A spark of imagination, perhaps. A stubbornness or a bravery that mortals only dreamed of. But he couldn't see it. He prayed that Ayah was still in there, somewhere, and that the nothingness hadn't taken her forever.

He dreamed of felling that terrible tree, too. He even bought an axe, with bottle caps that he convinced to look like coins. But he was no warrior; he could barely even lift the thing. Besides, he had another quest in mind. An oath he meant to keep.

Long ago, in the cool of a summer night, he and Ayah swore a pact: that one day he would let her go. "When I fall to the Mists for good," Ayah had said, "you must go and live your life without me."

"I will," Magpie said, but of course he was lying.

"You must *promise* me," she commanded, drawing herself up to her full, massive height. Her vermillion eyes shone fiercely. "One day I will not recognize you, and I would not have you see that. Promise me, my love."

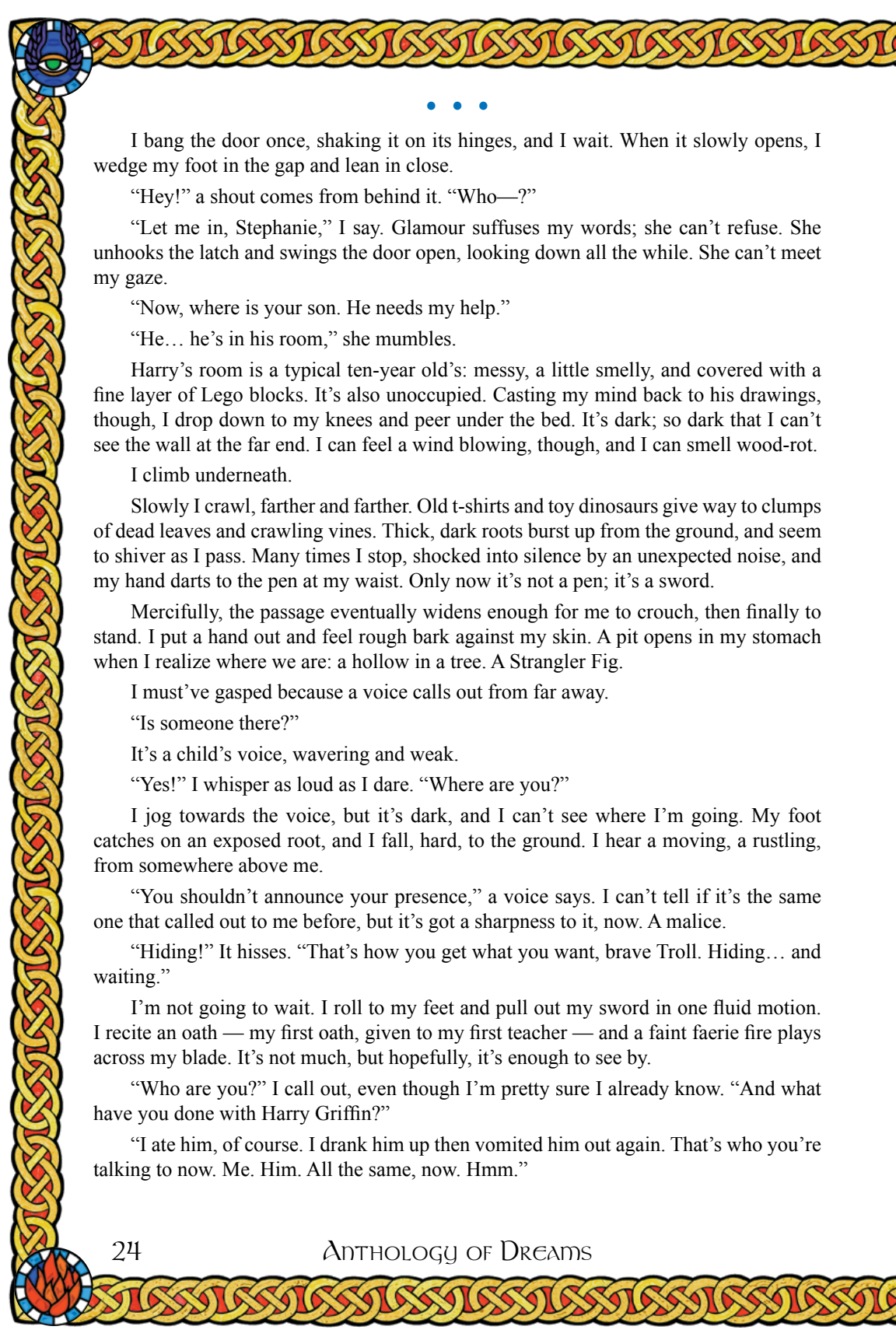
Magpie stood up straight and puffed out his small chest. When he spoke, his words were truer than ever before, and more eloquent too. The Wyrd made it so.

"I swear to you, my lady, my love, it will be as you say. But I will not give up easily. Six times will I try to rouse you from your slumber, and six gifts will I bring. And if they will not rouse you, then I will let you sleep."

Ayah smiled, even as her eyes glistened. "Six times, eh? Like the nursery rhyme? 'One for sorrow, two for joy'..."

"Three for a girl, four for a boy," her husband continued. "Five for silver, six for gold..."

"And seven for a secret never told."



I bang the door once, shaking it on its hinges, and I wait. When it slowly opens, I wedge my foot in the gap and lean in close.

“Hey!” a shout comes from behind it. “Who—?”

“Let me in, Stephanie,” I say. Glamour suffuses my words; she can’t refuse. She unhooks the latch and swings the door open, looking down all the while. She can’t meet my gaze.

“Now, where is your son. He needs my help.”

“He... he’s in his room,” she mumbles.

Harry’s room is a typical ten-year old’s: messy, a little smelly, and covered with a fine layer of Lego blocks. It’s also unoccupied. Casting my mind back to his drawings, though, I drop down to my knees and peer under the bed. It’s dark; so dark that I can’t see the wall at the far end. I can feel a wind blowing, though, and I can smell wood-rot.

I climb underneath.

Slowly I crawl, farther and farther. Old t-shirts and toy dinosaurs give way to clumps of dead leaves and crawling vines. Thick, dark roots burst up from the ground, and seem to shiver as I pass. Many times I stop, shocked into silence by an unexpected noise, and my hand darts to the pen at my waist. Only now it’s not a pen; it’s a sword.

Mercifully, the passage eventually widens enough for me to crouch, then finally to stand. I put a hand out and feel rough bark against my skin. A pit opens in my stomach when I realize where we are: a hollow in a tree. A Strangler Fig.

I must’ve gasped because a voice calls out from far away.

“Is someone there?”

It’s a child’s voice, wavering and weak.

“Yes!” I whisper as loud as I dare. “Where are you?”

I jog towards the voice, but it’s dark, and I can’t see where I’m going. My foot catches on an exposed root, and I fall, hard, to the ground. I hear a moving, a rustling, from somewhere above me.

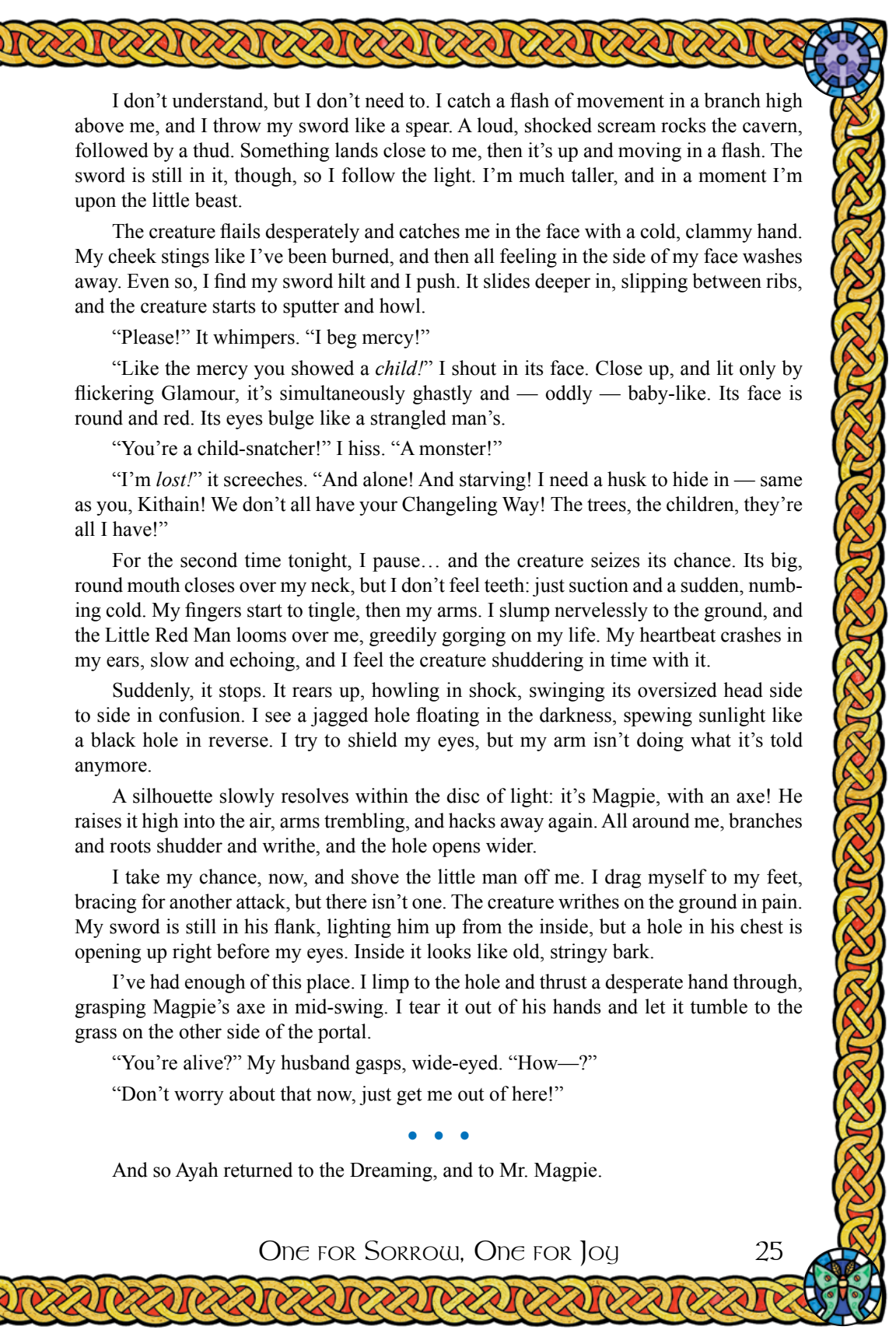
“You shouldn’t announce your presence,” a voice says. I can’t tell if it’s the same one that called out to me before, but it’s got a sharpness to it, now. A malice.

“Hiding!” It hisses. “That’s how you get what you want, brave Troll. Hiding... and waiting.”

I’m not going to wait. I roll to my feet and pull out my sword in one fluid motion. I recite an oath — my first oath, given to my first teacher — and a faint faerie fire plays across my blade. It’s not much, but hopefully, it’s enough to see by.

“Who are you?” I call out, even though I’m pretty sure I already know. “And what have you done with Harry Griffin?”

“I ate him, of course. I drank him up then vomited him out again. That’s who you’re talking to now. Me. Him. All the same, now. Hmm.”



I don't understand, but I don't need to. I catch a flash of movement in a branch high above me, and I throw my sword like a spear. A loud, shocked scream rocks the cavern, followed by a thud. Something lands close to me, then it's up and moving in a flash. The sword is still in it, though, so I follow the light. I'm much taller, and in a moment I'm upon the little beast.

The creature flails desperately and catches me in the face with a cold, clammy hand. My cheek stings like I've been burned, and then all feeling in the side of my face washes away. Even so, I find my sword hilt and I push. It slides deeper in, slipping between ribs, and the creature starts to sputter and howl.

"Please!" It whimpers. "I beg mercy!"

"Like the mercy you showed a *child*!" I shout in its face. Close up, and lit only by flickering Glamour, it's simultaneously ghastly and — oddly — baby-like. Its face is round and red. Its eyes bulge like a strangled man's.

"You're a child-snatcher!" I hiss. "A monster!"

"I'm *lost*!" it screeches. "And alone! And starving! I need a husk to hide in — same as you, Kithain! We don't all have your Changeling Way! The trees, the children, they're all I have!"

For the second time tonight, I pause... and the creature seizes its chance. Its big, round mouth closes over my neck, but I don't feel teeth: just suction and a sudden, numbing cold. My fingers start to tingle, then my arms. I slump nervelessly to the ground, and the Little Red Man looms over me, greedily gorging on my life. My heartbeat crashes in my ears, slow and echoing, and I feel the creature shuddering in time with it.

Suddenly, it stops. It rears up, howling in shock, swinging its oversized head side to side in confusion. I see a jagged hole floating in the darkness, spewing sunlight like a black hole in reverse. I try to shield my eyes, but my arm isn't doing what it's told anymore.

A silhouette slowly resolves within the disc of light: it's Magpie, with an axe! He raises it high into the air, arms trembling, and hacks away again. All around me, branches and roots shudder and writhe, and the hole opens wider.

I take my chance, now, and shove the little man off me. I drag myself to my feet, bracing for another attack, but there isn't one. The creature writhes on the ground in pain. My sword is still in his flank, lighting him up from the inside, but a hole in his chest is opening up right before my eyes. Inside it looks like old, stringy bark.

I've had enough of this place. I limp to the hole and thrust a desperate hand through, grasping Magpie's axe in mid-swing. I tear it out of his hands and let it tumble to the grass on the other side of the portal.


"You're alive?" My husband gasps, wide-eyed. "How—?"

"Don't worry about that now, just get me out of here!"

• • •

And so Ayah returned to the Dreaming, and to Mr. Magpie.





The first thing the couple did — after a much-needed embrace — was finish chopping down the Strangler Fig. Ayah took up the axe while Magpie shooed away anyone who came too close (“Of *course* we’re council workers,” he said. “It was infested; had to come down.”)

They set it alight and sat on the grass to watch it burn. Ayah glanced up at the sky and realized that last night’s storm had given way to a lovely, sunny morning. Such a thing was rather normal for Melbourne, but a good omen nonetheless.

Mr. Magpie nestled into the crook of Ayah’s arm and started preening his feathers. It was obvious, though, that he was building up to saying something; trying, no doubt, to figure out how to say it properly. Finally, he blurted it out:

“Will you come with me now, m’lady, m’love?”

Ayah was about to answer, but now that he’d started talking, he wasn’t stopping. It poured out in a torrent of nervous energy.

“I know you love your job, yeah? Your children. For some reason, you even love the dramas and the smoke-breaks and quiet cries in the stairwell when it all gets too much. All the stuff that tears at you, that makes it so hard... that’s the stuff you want. But that’s the stuff that’ll kill you!”

“Magpie, I—”

“Why don’t you come with me, yeah? Live at the Freehold full-time? You’ve served so well for so long, someone *else* should do it now. If you come, you can be *you* forever. No more fear of losing that. Never-ever-ever!”

Ayah took him by the chin, then (or the beak, if you want to be precise), and turned him to face her.

“I wouldn’t be ‘*me*’ in the Freehold, my love. I’d be someone who breaks her oaths. Someone who left the people she swore to protect, alone, with creatures like *that* out there.”

She nodded towards the bonfire, and that’s when she realized how cold she still felt. On the inside. Even if she’d fought it off this time, she knew, that chill would never truly go away.

“I’m only ‘*me*’ out *here*, where I’m doing good. And I know it won’t last forever” — she grimaced, then — “but while I’ve got it, I want to enjoy it. *With* you.”

“Me too, m’lady” Magpie said, without a word of a lie.



# HONEY AND APPLES

*By Geoffrey McVey*

It was May of 1969. I knew that something was coming. I knew that we wouldn't be left alone anymore.

It had been so long. I'd been so hungry, and she'd wanted nothing more than to screw her way out of this little town, but we waited because I knew they'd come back. I knew they'd keep their promise to us.

You don't understand. If you weren't there, if you weren't waiting for what felt like lifetimes, you wouldn't know what it was like to hope to see them again. They were our everything. They were shining and bright and...


I knew who I was before I could fix my first car. I knew it when I took a bite out of the kid who punched me at school. I think his name was Tom. It might have been Terry. Maybe it was Ron. It doesn't matter. What matters is that I tore a chunk of his flesh away and spat it out at his feet. They sent me home that day. They didn't ever let me back.

What I didn't know was *what* I was. The only one even a little like me was Janet, and that wasn't even close. People smiled at her on the street. Guys whistled from their cars. No one ever told her she made their skin crawl, or flinch when they noticed she was standing close by.

"Hey," she said. "You in there?"

She always knew when I was thinking about them. She always seemed to know everything I was thinking, even if she hid it behind her smile. I'd never get tired of that smile. I'd never get tired of the sound her hooves made on the sidewalk, the sound everyone else heard as the clack of her heels.

"They're almost here. I can feel it. They're going to take us back."



There was that smile again, crooked teeth and all. “You’ve been saying that for as long as I’ve known you, Marty. They’re not coming. We’re on our own.”

“No,” I said, “this time it’s real. The Shining Host is going to march into the world and tell us what to do.”

• • •

Ross wasn’t a big town. It wasn’t even a town: it was a village. She thought that was funny like we were in Ye Olde England with shepherds and peasants and whatever else they had there. Knights, maybe. Who lives in a village in Illinois? Chicago Street ran straight through it, reminding us that there was a real city out there if you wanted to drive a few hours to reach it.

I never did see Chicago. I bet it would have been amazing. Janet’s sister went up there once with her boyfriend and couldn’t shut up about the skyscrapers or the crowds for a month after she came back. She turned pretty quiet about the trip after she caught him making out with Janet right afterward. Thinking about Chicago probably reminded her how easy it is for good memories to get stains all over them.

It’s weird. She smelled different after that. When she first came back, it was like good raw meat, all bloody and fresh. After she had found out about Janet and Steve, it turned into something between motor oil and paint thinner. I was the only one who noticed.

I didn’t say anything about it for the same reason I didn’t ask why no one else heard music in the spot where the old theater burned down or saw that Mrs. Fleming’s dog had too many legs. You could get away with it when you were six, but after that, even your parents would start to get scared of you.

They did. They still were.

That was also why I didn’t tell them about the dreams, the ones where I saw the Shining Host. I didn’t know where I came up with the name. I didn’t hear it from Janet. I could tell because she laughed the first time I said it like I’d told her I’d been dreaming about Tinkerbell. “Did they have wings, Marty? Were they all covered in fairy dust?” She was the only one who could say things like that to me. She’d figured out she could say it without me tearing her apart, even if I saw she was ready to run every time she taunted me.

“Some of them,” I mumbled.

“Some of they’ve got wings?”

“Yeah. Some’ve got wings, and some have antlers.” I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to get the dream back. “Some have skin that’s... you know the kind of shine you get on fish scales? It’s like that, but without the scales. And they’re beautiful. They’re all really beautiful, but not the same way movie stars are. They’re not like anything.”

She smiled but didn’t laugh this time. The smile didn’t quite reach her eyes, which had the shadow of that mix of worry and fear I always saw in my parents’. But we kept talking about it in the months that followed. At the time, I thought it was good to have a friend.



“So what’re they going to tell us to do?”

We sat on top of the garage, like we usually did in spring and summer, watching the sun go down. She’d snuck some of her dad’s scotch out in a flask, so she didn’t care about sitting close, and I didn’t mind, either. We’d perch there on the edge with our feet dangling: her with her hooves, me with my scaly black bird’s feet.

“I don’t know,” I said. “They’re going to tell us what we are, why we’re like this, why we don’t see things like normal people do. They’re going to tell us how we’re supposed to... fit.”

She snorted. “I already know what I am. I’m a faun.” She said the last part with casual pride.

“Just because you read that in a book at the library doesn’t mean it tells you anything. And it doesn’t tell me anything about what *I* am.”

I probably sounded bitter. I was. Even if they’d let me back into the library after that time I made Mr. Davis scream, there wasn’t anything like me in any of the books.

“Don’t be dumb,” Janet said. “I told you. You’re a harpy. You’re kinda like a bird, and kinda like a person, and you like food a lot. It was in the same book with the fauns.”

“You saw the picture, right? Do I look like that? I don’t have wings, and I definitely don’t have...” I cupped my hands in front of my chest. “You know.”

“Maybe you’re a late bloomer,” she teased. She wasn’t one, as every guy in Ross pointed out daily. “It’s as good a name as you’re going to get. What’s wrong with Marty the Harpy? Got a good sound to it.”

She must have seen I was getting into one of my moods because she kept going without missing a beat. “That can’t be all they’re going to do, is it? Turn up and say, ‘Marty, you’re a scary crow guy. Now that you know, go do scary crow guy stuff.’”

“You think I’m scary, Janet? I scare you?”

She rocked on the edge of the roof as she laughed. “Marty, you scare everyone. It’s what you do. I saw you come in the garage in the pouring rain without a drop on you. The rain’s too scared to get you wet, in case you get mad at it.”

“That was just once.”

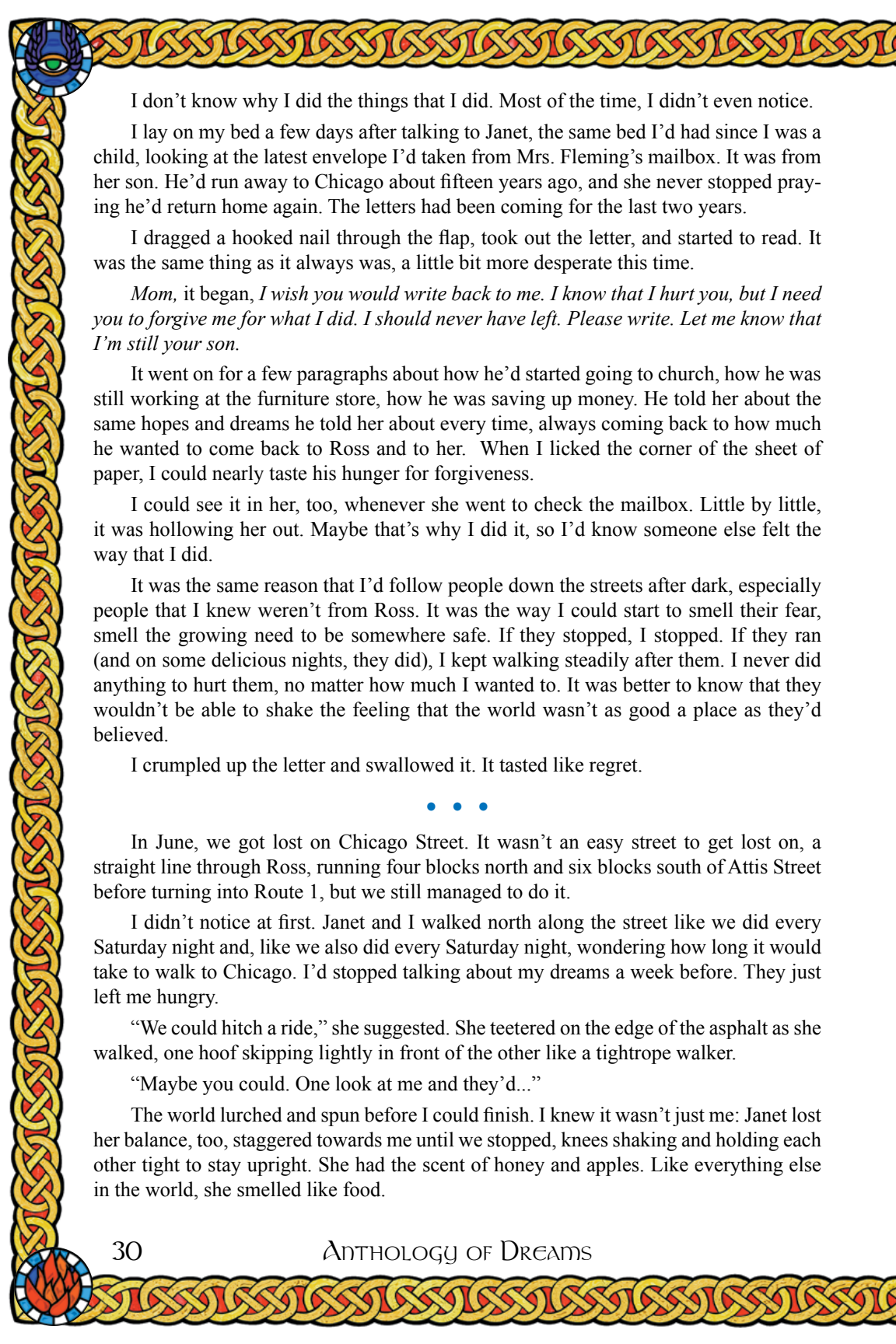
“Yeah, but it’s the kind of thing you remember, y’know?” She took another drink from the flask, her cheeks starting to flush. “I’m not scared of you. We gotta stick together, watch out for each other, right? I like you, Marty. You know that.”

I stared at her, silently and unblinkingly, for a long time. One single word was all it took to hurt me, and what was worse, I don’t think she ever noticed. I changed subjects.

“I don’t know what they’re going to tell us,” I finally said. “I just want someone to tell me what to do.”

“Okay, then. Here’s what you’re supposed to do: have a drink.”

I did, and we went back to watching the sun go down.



I don't know why I did the things that I did. Most of the time, I didn't even notice.

I lay on my bed a few days after talking to Janet, the same bed I'd had since I was a child, looking at the latest envelope I'd taken from Mrs. Fleming's mailbox. It was from her son. He'd run away to Chicago about fifteen years ago, and she never stopped praying he'd return home again. The letters had been coming for the last two years.

I dragged a hooked nail through the flap, took out the letter, and started to read. It was the same thing as it always was, a little bit more desperate this time.

*Mom, it began, I wish you would write back to me. I know that I hurt you, but I need you to forgive me for what I did. I should never have left. Please write. Let me know that I'm still your son.*

It went on for a few paragraphs about how he'd started going to church, how he was still working at the furniture store, how he was saving up money. He told her about the same hopes and dreams he told her about every time, always coming back to how much he wanted to come back to Ross and to her. When I licked the corner of the sheet of paper, I could nearly taste his hunger for forgiveness.

I could see it in her, too, whenever she went to check the mailbox. Little by little, it was hollowing her out. Maybe that's why I did it, so I'd know someone else felt the way that I did.

It was the same reason that I'd follow people down the streets after dark, especially people that I knew weren't from Ross. It was the way I could start to smell their fear, smell the growing need to be somewhere safe. If they stopped, I stopped. If they ran (and on some delicious nights, they did), I kept walking steadily after them. I never did anything to hurt them, no matter how much I wanted to. It was better to know that they wouldn't be able to shake the feeling that the world wasn't as good a place as they'd believed.

I crumpled up the letter and swallowed it. It tasted like regret.

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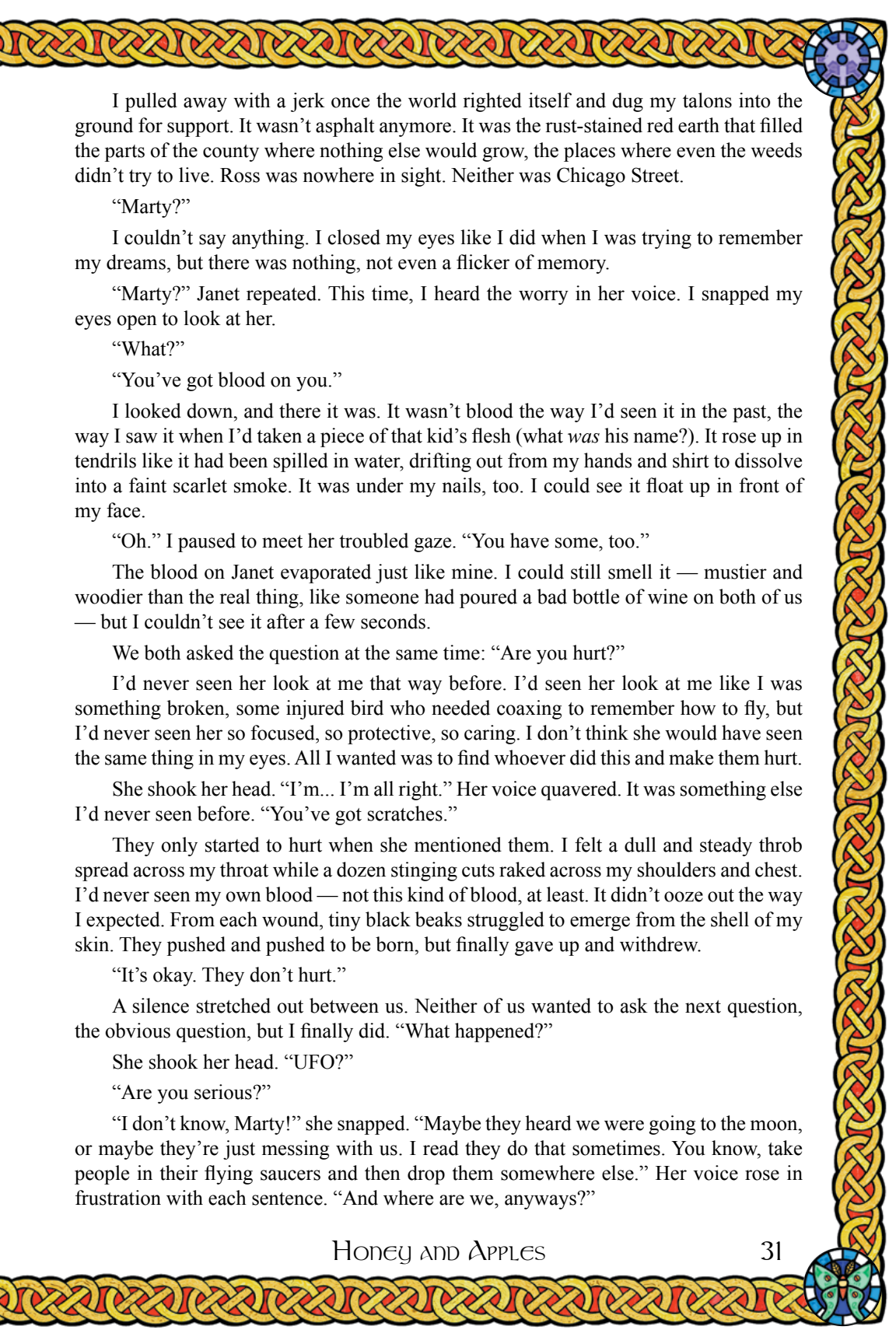
In June, we got lost on Chicago Street. It wasn't an easy street to get lost on, a straight line through Ross, running four blocks north and six blocks south of Attis Street before turning into Route 1, but we still managed to do it.

I didn't notice at first. Janet and I walked north along the street like we did every Saturday night and, like we also did every Saturday night, wondering how long it would take to walk to Chicago. I'd stopped talking about my dreams a week before. They just left me hungry.

"We could hitch a ride," she suggested. She teetered on the edge of the asphalt as she walked, one hoof skipping lightly in front of the other like a tightrope walker.

"Maybe you could. One look at me and they'd..."

The world lurched and spun before I could finish. I knew it wasn't just me: Janet lost her balance, too, staggered towards me until we stopped, knees shaking and holding each other tight to stay upright. She had the scent of honey and apples. Like everything else in the world, she smelled like food.



I pulled away with a jerk once the world righted itself and dug my talons into the ground for support. It wasn't asphalt anymore. It was the rust-stained red earth that filled the parts of the county where nothing else would grow, the places where even the weeds didn't try to live. Ross was nowhere in sight. Neither was Chicago Street.

"Marty?"

I couldn't say anything. I closed my eyes like I did when I was trying to remember my dreams, but there was nothing, not even a flicker of memory.

"Marty?" Janet repeated. This time, I heard the worry in her voice. I snapped my eyes open to look at her.

"What?"

"You've got blood on you."

I looked down, and there it was. It wasn't blood the way I'd seen it in the past, the way I saw it when I'd taken a piece of that kid's flesh (what *was* his name?). It rose up in tendrils like it had been spilled in water, drifting out from my hands and shirt to dissolve into a faint scarlet smoke. It was under my nails, too. I could see it float up in front of my face.

"Oh." I paused to meet her troubled gaze. "You have some, too."

The blood on Janet evaporated just like mine. I could still smell it — mustier and woodier than the real thing, like someone had poured a bad bottle of wine on both of us — but I couldn't see it after a few seconds.

We both asked the question at the same time: "Are you hurt?"

I'd never seen her look at me that way before. I'd seen her look at me like I was something broken, some injured bird who needed coaxing to remember how to fly, but I'd never seen her so focused, so protective, so caring. I don't think she would have seen the same thing in my eyes. All I wanted was to find whoever did this and make them hurt.

She shook her head. "I'm... I'm all right." Her voice quavered. It was something else I'd never seen before. "You've got scratches."

They only started to hurt when she mentioned them. I felt a dull and steady throb spread across my throat while a dozen stinging cuts raked across my shoulders and chest. I'd never seen my own blood — not this kind of blood, at least. It didn't ooze out the way I expected. From each wound, tiny black beaks struggled to emerge from the shell of my skin. They pushed and pushed to be born, but finally gave up and withdrew.

"It's okay. They don't hurt."

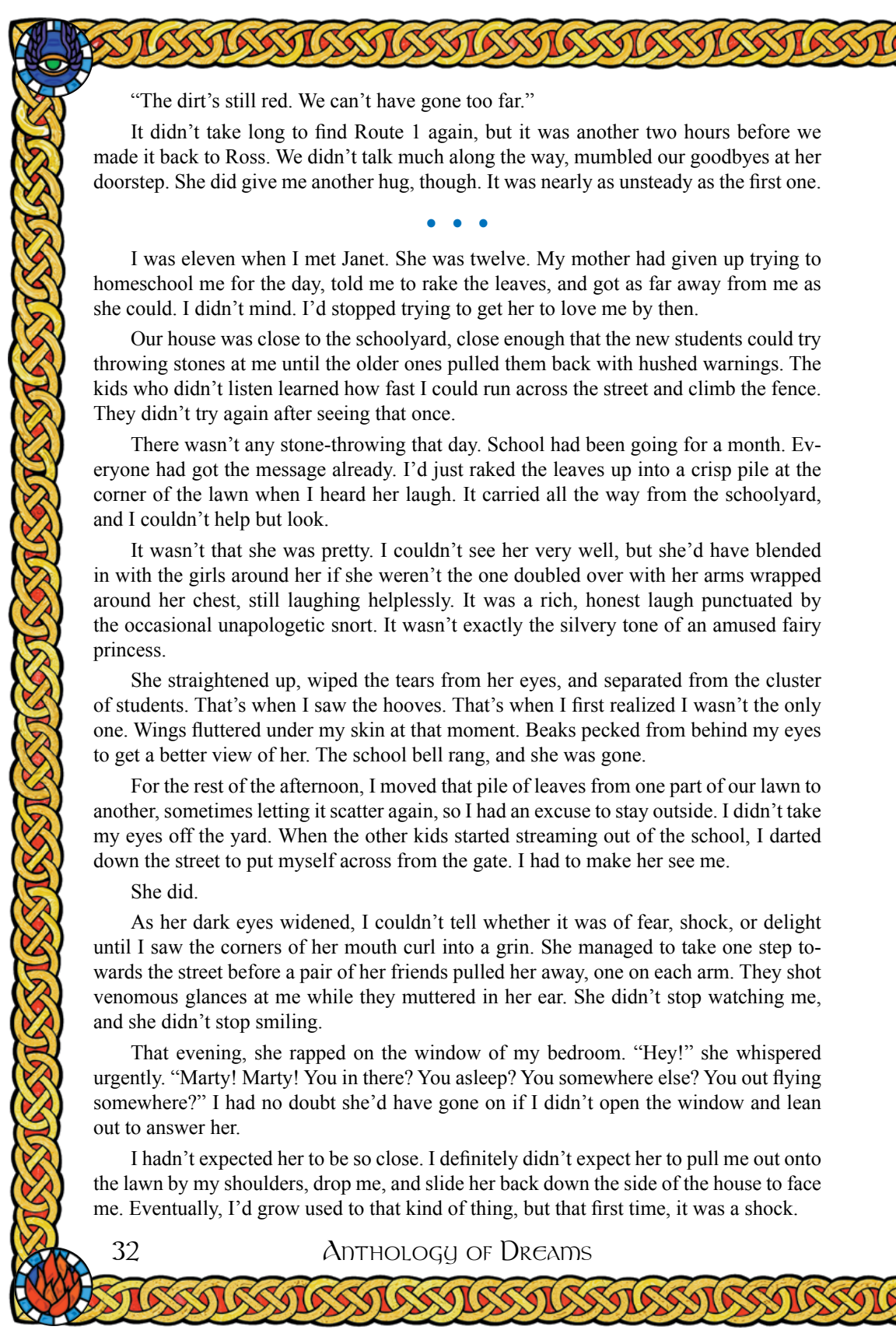
A silence stretched out between us. Neither of us wanted to ask the next question, the obvious question, but I finally did. "What happened?"

She shook her head. "UFO?"

"Are you serious?"

"I don't know, Marty!" she snapped. "Maybe they heard we were going to the moon, or maybe they're just messing with us. I read they do that sometimes. You know, take people in their flying saucers and then drop them somewhere else." Her voice rose in frustration with each sentence. "And where are we, anyways?"





"The dirt's still red. We can't have gone too far."

It didn't take long to find Route 1 again, but it was another two hours before we made it back to Ross. We didn't talk much along the way, mumbled our goodbyes at her doorstep. She did give me another hug, though. It was nearly as unsteady as the first one.

• • •

I was eleven when I met Janet. She was twelve. My mother had given up trying to homeschool me for the day, told me to rake the leaves, and got as far away from me as she could. I didn't mind. I'd stopped trying to get her to love me by then.

Our house was close to the schoolyard, close enough that the new students could try throwing stones at me until the older ones pulled them back with hushed warnings. The kids who didn't listen learned how fast I could run across the street and climb the fence. They didn't try again after seeing that once.

There wasn't any stone-throwing that day. School had been going for a month. Everyone had got the message already. I'd just raked the leaves up into a crisp pile at the corner of the lawn when I heard her laugh. It carried all the way from the schoolyard, and I couldn't help but look.

It wasn't that she was pretty. I couldn't see her very well, but she'd have blended in with the girls around her if she weren't the one doubled over with her arms wrapped around her chest, still laughing helplessly. It was a rich, honest laugh punctuated by the occasional unapologetic snort. It wasn't exactly the silvery tone of an amused fairy princess.

She straightened up, wiped the tears from her eyes, and separated from the cluster of students. That's when I saw the hooves. That's when I first realized I wasn't the only one. Wings fluttered under my skin at that moment. Beaks pecked from behind my eyes to get a better view of her. The school bell rang, and she was gone.

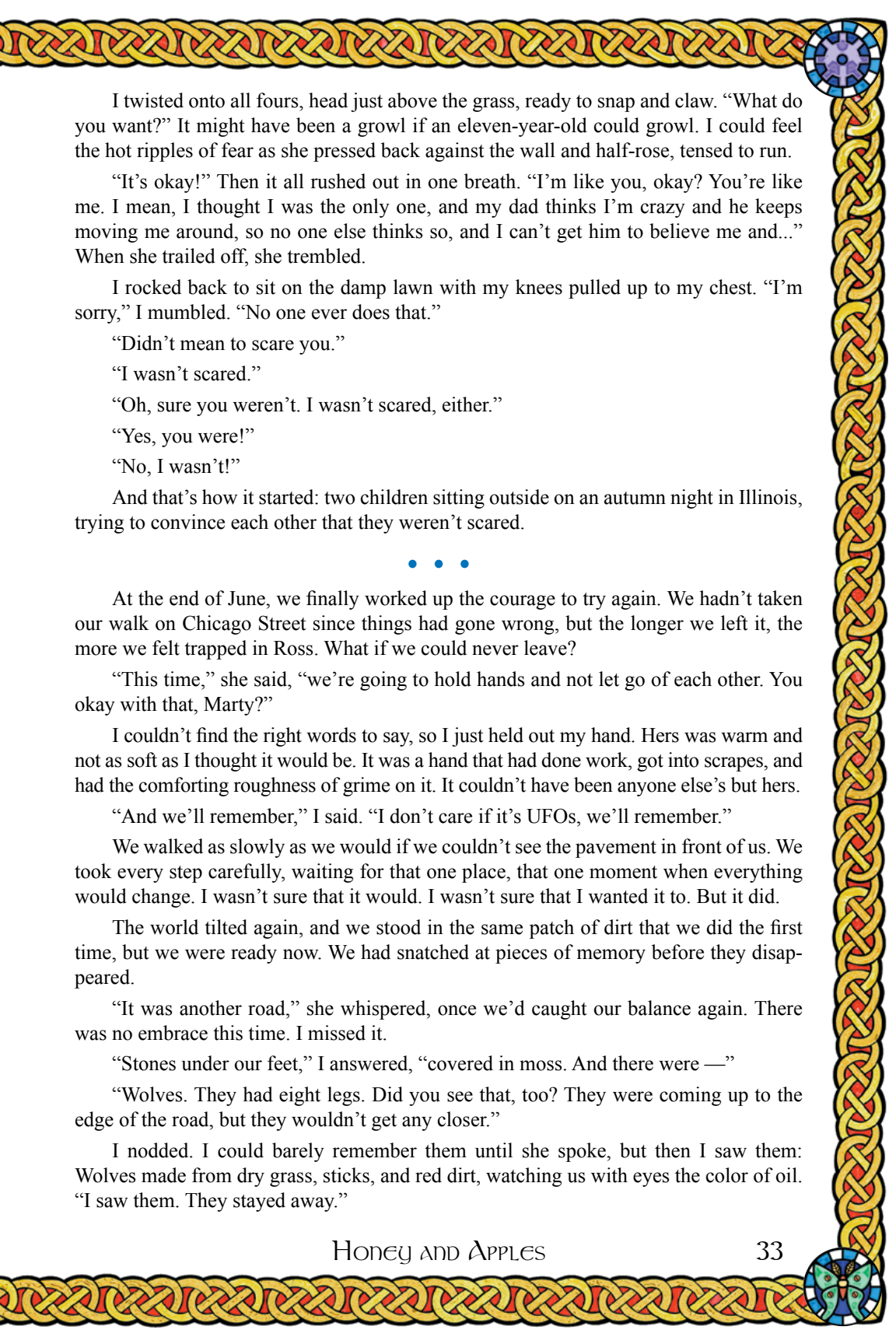
For the rest of the afternoon, I moved that pile of leaves from one part of our lawn to another, sometimes letting it scatter again, so I had an excuse to stay outside. I didn't take my eyes off the yard. When the other kids started streaming out of the school, I darted down the street to put myself across from the gate. I had to make her see me.

She did.

As her dark eyes widened, I couldn't tell whether it was of fear, shock, or delight until I saw the corners of her mouth curl into a grin. She managed to take one step towards the street before a pair of her friends pulled her away, one on each arm. They shot venomous glances at me while they muttered in her ear. She didn't stop watching me, and she didn't stop smiling.

That evening, she rapped on the window of my bedroom. "Hey!" she whispered urgently. "Marty! Marty! You in there? You asleep? You somewhere else? You out flying somewhere?" I had no doubt she'd have gone on if I didn't open the window and lean out to answer her.

I hadn't expected her to be so close. I definitely didn't expect her to pull me out onto the lawn by my shoulders, drop me, and slide her back down the side of the house to face me. Eventually, I'd grow used to that kind of thing, but that first time, it was a shock.



I twisted onto all fours, head just above the grass, ready to snap and claw. “What do you want?” It might have been a growl if an eleven-year-old could growl. I could feel the hot ripples of fear as she pressed back against the wall and half-rose, tensed to run.

“It’s okay!” Then it all rushed out in one breath. “I’m like you, okay? You’re like me. I mean, I thought I was the only one, and my dad thinks I’m crazy and he keeps moving me around, so no one else thinks so, and I can’t get him to believe me and...” When she trailed off, she trembled.

I rocked back to sit on the damp lawn with my knees pulled up to my chest. “I’m sorry,” I mumbled. “No one ever does that.”

“Didn’t mean to scare you.”

“I wasn’t scared.”

“Oh, sure you weren’t. I wasn’t scared, either.”

“Yes, you were!”

“No, I wasn’t!”

And that’s how it started: two children sitting outside on an autumn night in Illinois, trying to convince each other that they weren’t scared.



At the end of June, we finally worked up the courage to try again. We hadn’t taken our walk on Chicago Street since things had gone wrong, but the longer we left it, the more we felt trapped in Ross. What if we could never leave?

“This time,” she said, “we’re going to hold hands and not let go of each other. You okay with that, Marty?”

I couldn’t find the right words to say, so I just held out my hand. Hers was warm and not as soft as I thought it would be. It was a hand that had done work, got into scrapes, and had the comforting roughness of grime on it. It couldn’t have been anyone else’s but hers.

“And we’ll remember,” I said. “I don’t care if it’s UFOs, we’ll remember.”

We walked as slowly as we would if we couldn’t see the pavement in front of us. We took every step carefully, waiting for that one place, that one moment when everything would change. I wasn’t sure that it would. I wasn’t sure that I wanted it to. But it did.

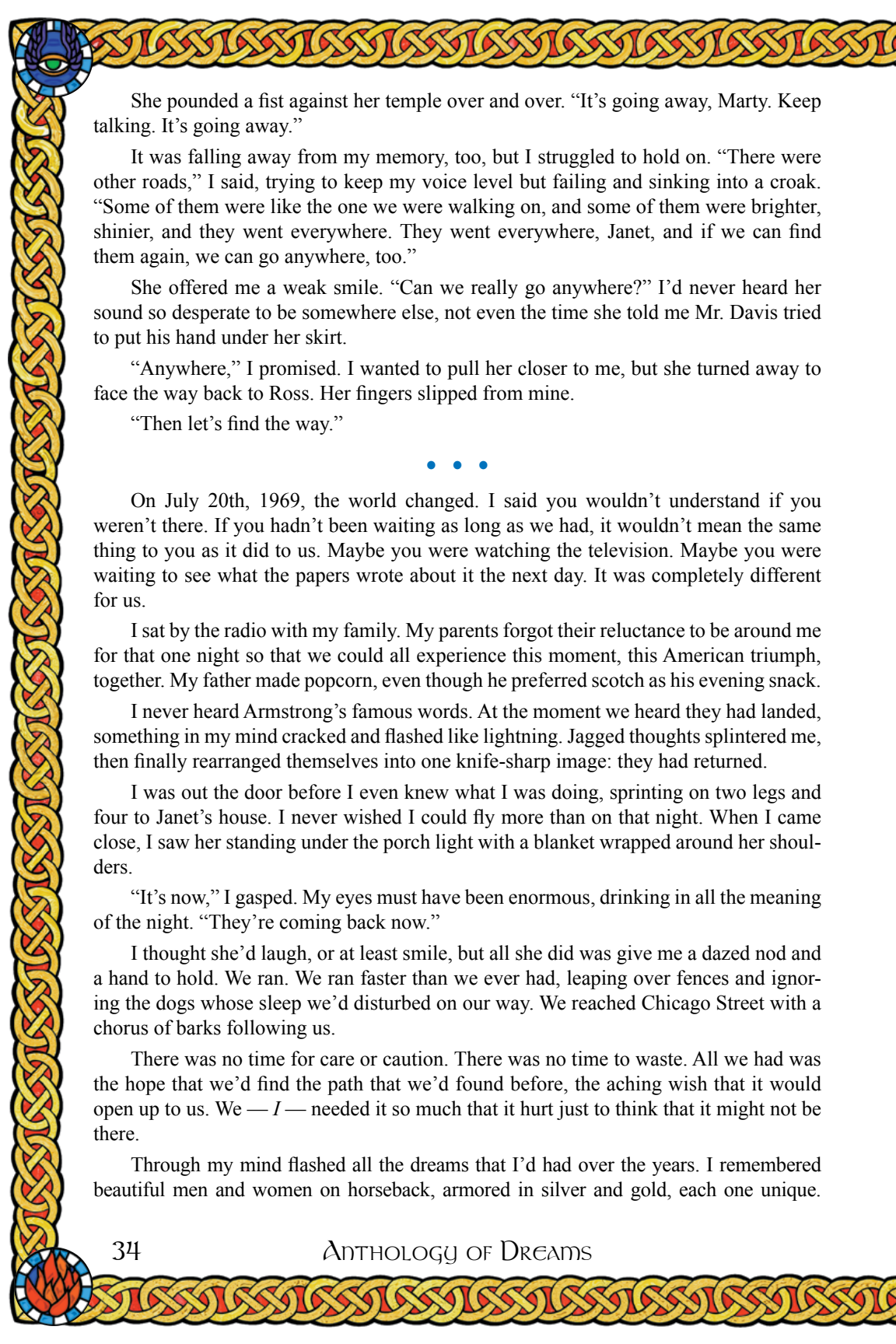
The world tilted again, and we stood in the same patch of dirt that we did the first time, but we were ready now. We had snatched at pieces of memory before they disappeared.

“It was another road,” she whispered, once we’d caught our balance again. There was no embrace this time. I missed it.

“Stones under our feet,” I answered, “covered in moss. And there were —”

“Wolves. They had eight legs. Did you see that, too? They were coming up to the edge of the road, but they wouldn’t get any closer.”

I nodded. I could barely remember them until she spoke, but then I saw them: Wolves made from dry grass, sticks, and red dirt, watching us with eyes the color of oil. “I saw them. They stayed away.”



She pounded a fist against her temple over and over. “It’s going away, Marty. Keep talking. It’s going away.”

It was falling away from my memory, too, but I struggled to hold on. “There were other roads,” I said, trying to keep my voice level but failing and sinking into a croak. “Some of them were like the one we were walking on, and some of them were brighter, shinier, and they went everywhere. They went everywhere, Janet, and if we can find them again, we can go anywhere, too.”

She offered me a weak smile. “Can we really go anywhere?” I’d never heard her sound so desperate to be somewhere else, not even the time she told me Mr. Davis tried to put his hand under her skirt.

“Anywhere,” I promised. I wanted to pull her closer to me, but she turned away to face the way back to Ross. Her fingers slipped from mine.

“Then let’s find the way.”



On July 20th, 1969, the world changed. I said you wouldn’t understand if you weren’t there. If you hadn’t been waiting as long as we had, it wouldn’t mean the same thing to you as it did to us. Maybe you were watching the television. Maybe you were waiting to see what the papers wrote about it the next day. It was completely different for us.

I sat by the radio with my family. My parents forgot their reluctance to be around me for that one night so that we could all experience this moment, this American triumph, together. My father made popcorn, even though he preferred scotch as his evening snack.

I never heard Armstrong’s famous words. At the moment we heard they had landed, something in my mind cracked and flashed like lightning. Jagged thoughts splintered me, then finally rearranged themselves into one knife-sharp image: they had returned.

I was out the door before I even knew what I was doing, sprinting on two legs and four to Janet’s house. I never wished I could fly more than on that night. When I came close, I saw her standing under the porch light with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders.

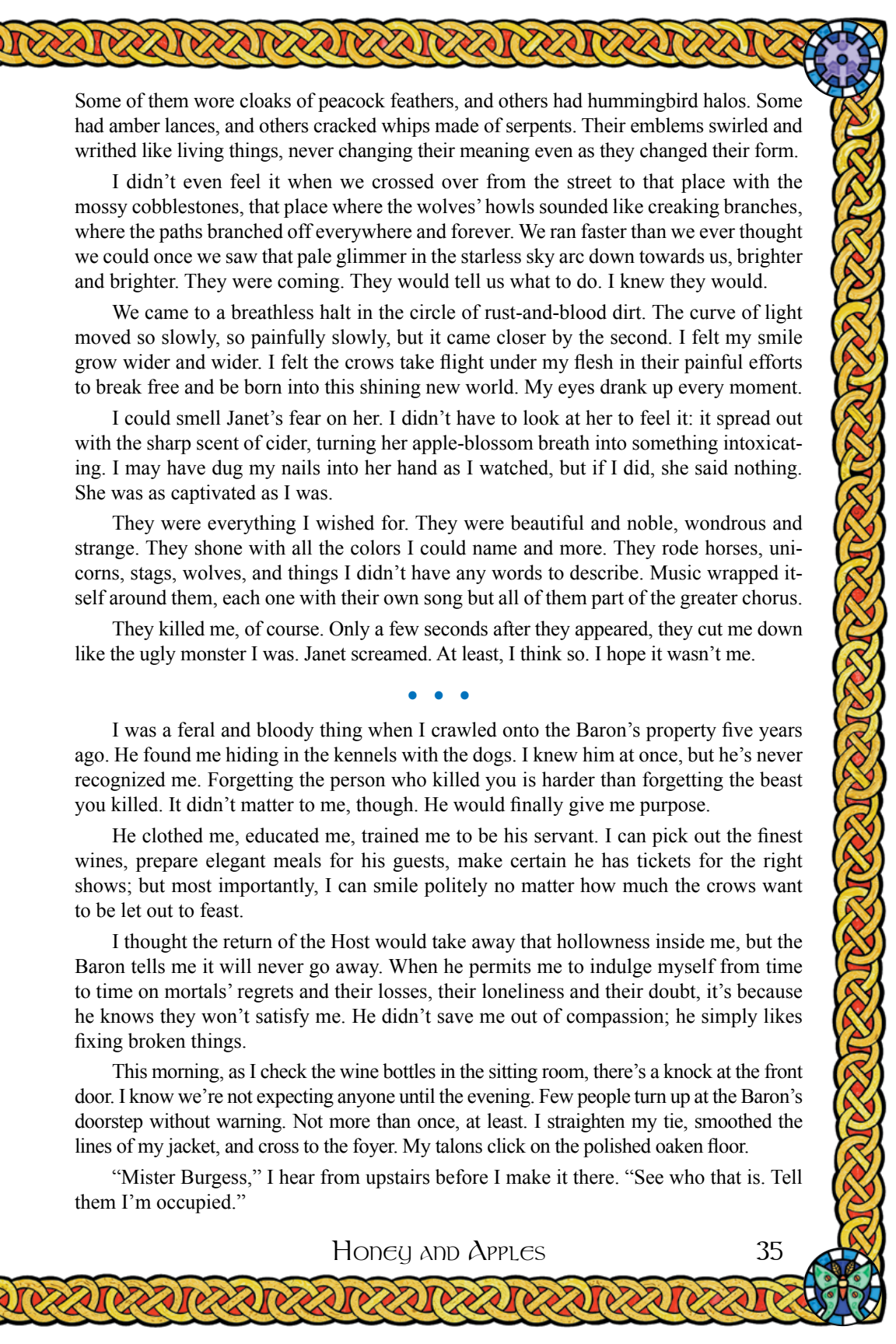
“It’s now,” I gasped. My eyes must have been enormous, drinking in all the meaning of the night. “They’re coming back now.”

I thought she’d laugh, or at least smile, but all she did was give me a dazed nod and a hand to hold. We ran. We ran faster than we ever had, leaping over fences and ignoring the dogs whose sleep we’d disturbed on our way. We reached Chicago Street with a chorus of barks following us.

There was no time for care or caution. There was no time to waste. All we had was the hope that we’d find the path that we’d found before, the aching wish that it would open up to us. We — *I* — needed it so much that it hurt just to think that it might not be there.

Through my mind flashed all the dreams that I’d had over the years. I remembered beautiful men and women on horseback, armored in silver and gold, each one unique.





Some of them wore cloaks of peacock feathers, and others had hummingbird halos. Some had amber lances, and others cracked whips made of serpents. Their emblems swirled and writhed like living things, never changing their meaning even as they changed their form.

I didn't even feel it when we crossed over from the street to that place with the mossy cobblestones, that place where the wolves' howls sounded like creaking branches, where the paths branched off everywhere and forever. We ran faster than we ever thought we could once we saw that pale glimmer in the starless sky arc down towards us, brighter and brighter. They were coming. They would tell us what to do. I knew they would.

We came to a breathless halt in the circle of rust-and-blood dirt. The curve of light moved so slowly, so painfully slowly, but it came closer by the second. I felt my smile grow wider and wider. I felt the crows take flight under my flesh in their painful efforts to break free and be born into this shining new world. My eyes drank up every moment.

I could smell Janet's fear on her. I didn't have to look at her to feel it: it spread out with the sharp scent of cider, turning her apple-blossom breath into something intoxicating. I may have dug my nails into her hand as I watched, but if I did, she said nothing. She was as captivated as I was.

They were everything I wished for. They were beautiful and noble, wondrous and strange. They shone with all the colors I could name and more. They rode horses, unicorns, stags, wolves, and things I didn't have any words to describe. Music wrapped itself around them, each one with their own song but all of them part of the greater chorus.

They killed me, of course. Only a few seconds after they appeared, they cut me down like the ugly monster I was. Janet screamed. At least, I think so. I hope it wasn't me.



I was a feral and bloody thing when I crawled onto the Baron's property five years ago. He found me hiding in the kennels with the dogs. I knew him at once, but he's never recognized me. Forgetting the person who killed you is harder than forgetting the beast you killed. It didn't matter to me, though. He would finally give me purpose.

He clothed me, educated me, trained me to be his servant. I can pick out the finest wines, prepare elegant meals for his guests, make certain he has tickets for the right shows; but most importantly, I can smile politely no matter how much the crows want to be let out to feast.

I thought the return of the Host would take away that hollowness inside me, but the Baron tells me it will never go away. When he permits me to indulge myself from time to time on mortals' regrets and their losses, their loneliness and their doubt, it's because he knows they won't satisfy me. He didn't save me out of compassion; he simply likes fixing broken things.

This morning, as I check the wine bottles in the sitting room, there's a knock at the front door. I know we're not expecting anyone until the evening. Few people turn up at the Baron's doorstep without warning. Not more than once, at least. I straighten my tie, smoothed the lines of my jacket, and cross to the foyer. My talons click on the polished oaken floor.

"Mister Burgess," I hear from upstairs before I make it there. "See who that is. Tell them I'm occupied."

I'm about to open the door, ready to dismiss the visitor with my usual practiced formality when I catch a familiar scent and freeze. My talons dig into the floor, and my mind absurdly makes a note that I'll have to fix that later. I feel like I'm eleven years old again with Janet calling my name outside my bedroom window. With the second knock, I know it's just like that: she won't stop until I answer.

One breath and an unnecessary re-straightening of my tie later, I open the door; for a heartbeat, I feel a curdling mixture of relief and disappointment. The woman on the doorstep might be my age or a little younger, dressed with the sort of deliberate carelessness that would earn withering disapproval from the Baron. I don't recognize her face at all, and I know it can't be her this many years later, but I still hesitate. She stares at me as seconds tick on awkwardly.

Then she smiles, the mortal mask fades away, and there she is: honey and apples, hooves and horns. Another lifetime for her, just as it is for me. I can't move, even though all the crows want to take flight; I can't speak, even though it feels their caws fill the air; I can't breathe, even though their wings stir up a tempest under my skin.

"Hey, Marty," she finally says. "Wanna come out and play?"

For the first time I can remember, I don't feel hungry inside.





# NO SUCH THING AS DRAGONS

*By Jason Ross Inczauskis*

I saw my very first real dragon! He was at the bookstore, browsing the mystery section, flipping through a long, boring book that probably didn't even have any pictures in it. He was just standing there, sipping a cup of coffee. He had maroon scales, just a little bit shiny at the tips. His tail coiled back and forth, and the other customers just walked around it, like they didn't even notice.

"Mom, that guy's a dragon," I whispered, tugging on her sleeve and pointing.

"Gavin Langley, it's rude to point!" she snapped.

"But Mom, he really is a dragon..." I protested.

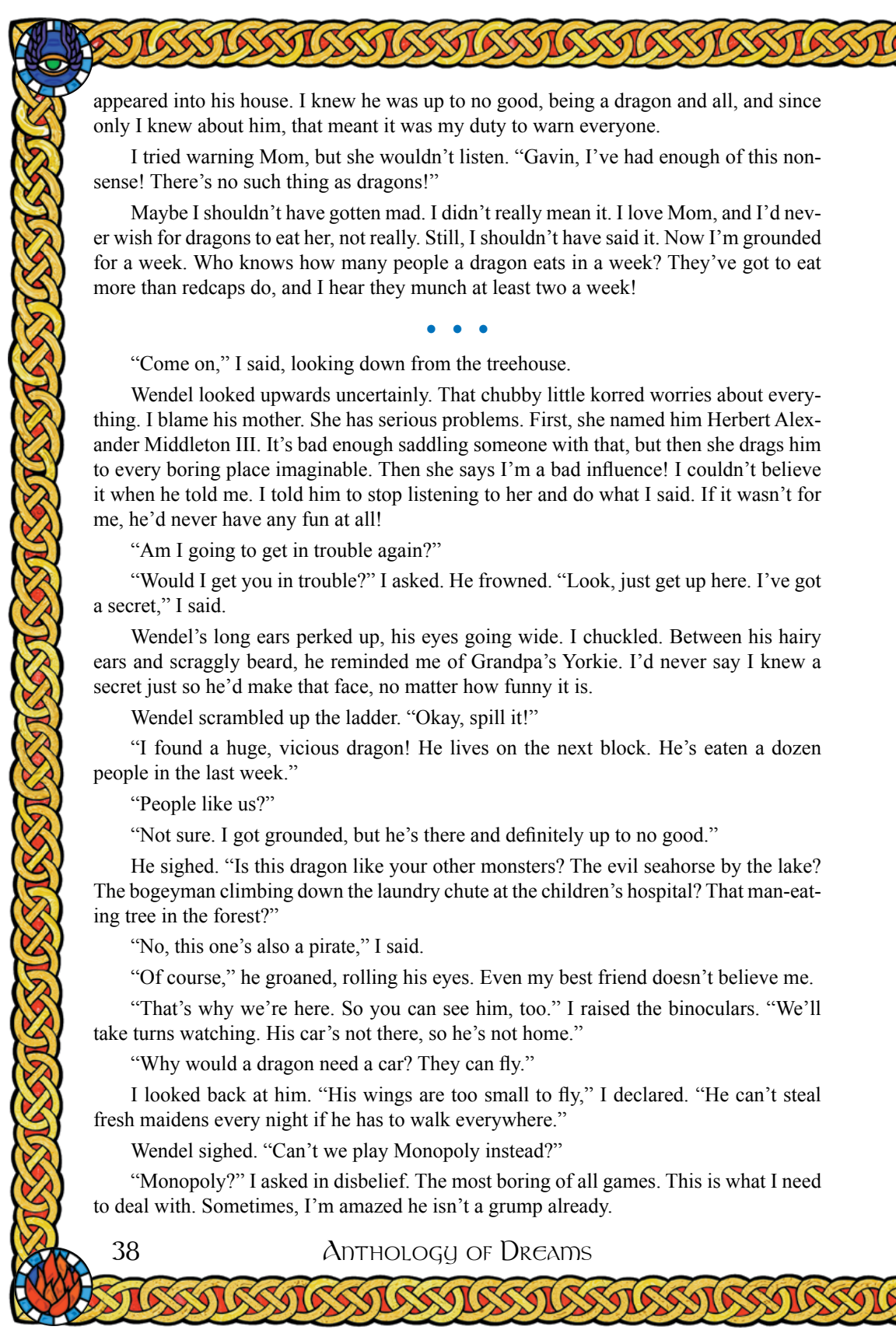
"There's no such thing as dragons!" she hissed.

And that was that. She dragged me to the checkout line and we left. I thought that she might see him, but she never sees anything I want her to see. Instead, she spent half the ride home lecturing me about my lies. She always does that. I never lie, not really, but she never believes me and says that I lie. It's not fair.

That's my biggest curse. It's not just Mom. Nobody ever believes me. Not even the other people that see what's really there. They take one look at me, see the Incredible Frog Boy, and just like that, they decide every word I say is a lie. "Odhran's a pooka," they say. "You can't trust him." I tried telling them that I'm actually a cursed sidhe prince, but they don't believe me.

I was in my treehouse a few days later when I saw the dragon again. I was watching the neighborhood through my binoculars. It turns out that the dragon lives on the block behind mine! I saw him getting out of his car with a paper bag in his arms. Then he dis-





appeared into his house. I knew he was up to no good, being a dragon and all, and since only I knew about him, that meant it was my duty to warn everyone.

I tried warning Mom, but she wouldn't listen. "Gavin, I've had enough of this nonsense! There's no such thing as dragons!"

Maybe I shouldn't have gotten mad. I didn't really mean it. I love Mom, and I'd never wish for dragons to eat her, not really. Still, I shouldn't have said it. Now I'm grounded for a week. Who knows how many people a dragon eats in a week? They've got to eat more than redcaps do, and I hear they munch at least two a week!

• • •

"Come on," I said, looking down from the treehouse.

Wendel looked upwards uncertainly. That chubby little korred worries about everything. I blame his mother. She has serious problems. First, she named him Herbert Alexander Middleton III. It's bad enough saddling someone with that, but then she drags him to every boring place imaginable. Then she says I'm a bad influence! I couldn't believe it when he told me. I told him to stop listening to her and do what I said. If it wasn't for me, he'd never have any fun at all!

"Am I going to get in trouble again?"

"Would I get you in trouble?" I asked. He frowned. "Look, just get up here. I've got a secret," I said.

Wendel's long ears perked up, his eyes going wide. I chuckled. Between his hairy ears and scraggly beard, he reminded me of Grandpa's Yorkie. I'd never say I knew a secret just so he'd make that face, no matter how funny it is.

Wendel scrambled up the ladder. "Okay, spill it!"

"I found a huge, vicious dragon! He lives on the next block. He's eaten a dozen people in the last week."

"People like us?"

"Not sure. I got grounded, but he's there and definitely up to no good."

He sighed. "Is this dragon like your other monsters? The evil seahorse by the lake? The bogeyman climbing down the laundry chute at the children's hospital? That man-eating tree in the forest?"

"No, this one's also a pirate," I said.

"Of course," he groaned, rolling his eyes. Even my best friend doesn't believe me.

"That's why we're here. So you can see him, too." I raised the binoculars. "We'll take turns watching. His car's not there, so he's not home."

"Why would a dragon need a car? They can fly."

I looked back at him. "His wings are too small to fly," I declared. "He can't steal fresh maidens every night if he has to walk everywhere."

Wendel sighed. "Can't we play Monopoly instead?"

"Monopoly?" I asked in disbelief. The most boring of all games. This is what I need to deal with. Sometimes, I'm amazed he isn't a grump already.

"Sorry," he said quietly. I don't think he meant it, though. He actually likes boring things. He cleans his room, does homework, stuff like that. Mom's always like, "Why can't you be more like Herbie? He's such a nice boy." I wonder why nobody asks *him* to be more like *me*.

"Can I at least use the binoculars?"

"When it's your turn. Why didn't you bring your telescope?"

"You know Mom won't let me take it outside without her," he whined.

"I told you to stop listening to her! It's *your* telescope, isn't it?"

"Well, yeah," he said.

"Then it's your property. You can do whatever you want with it."

"But..." he protested.

"Your property," I said proudly. I know how these things work, even if Wendel's mom thinks she can trick him into obeying her. "Next time, just bring it."

I turned, raising my binoculars. "There he is!" Wendel grabbed for the binoculars, but I waved him away. "Oh my God! There's two of them!"

A second dragon climbed out of the car. A *girl* dragon. Her scales were blue, like a Jolly Rancher, only shinier. She also had a dragon's hoard worth of jewelry dripping off of her.

He opened the door for her, holding another bag in his hand. I handed the binoculars to Wendel, who immediately looked through. "Did you see them?"

"Well, I saw the door close."

"Buckner's reign of terror can't continue!" I declared.

"Who's Buckner?"

"That's the dragon's name! Richard Buckner. I'm sure it's really something like Smaug or Fafnir. You know, something sinister."

"Ah, so you know the dragon's name, too. Despite being grounded."

"Grandpa fell asleep while watching me the other day. I snuck out and raided the dragon's mailbox. It's a little thing called renaissance."

"You mean reconnaissance."

"Whatever!" I exclaimed. "The point is that this is our neighborhood, and we won't let a bunch of dragons ruin everything! And if we stop them ourselves, we'll be heroes!"

Wendel raised one eyebrow. "Heroes?"

"Yep! We might even get knighted. Then everyone will respect Sir Odhran and his trusty sidekick."

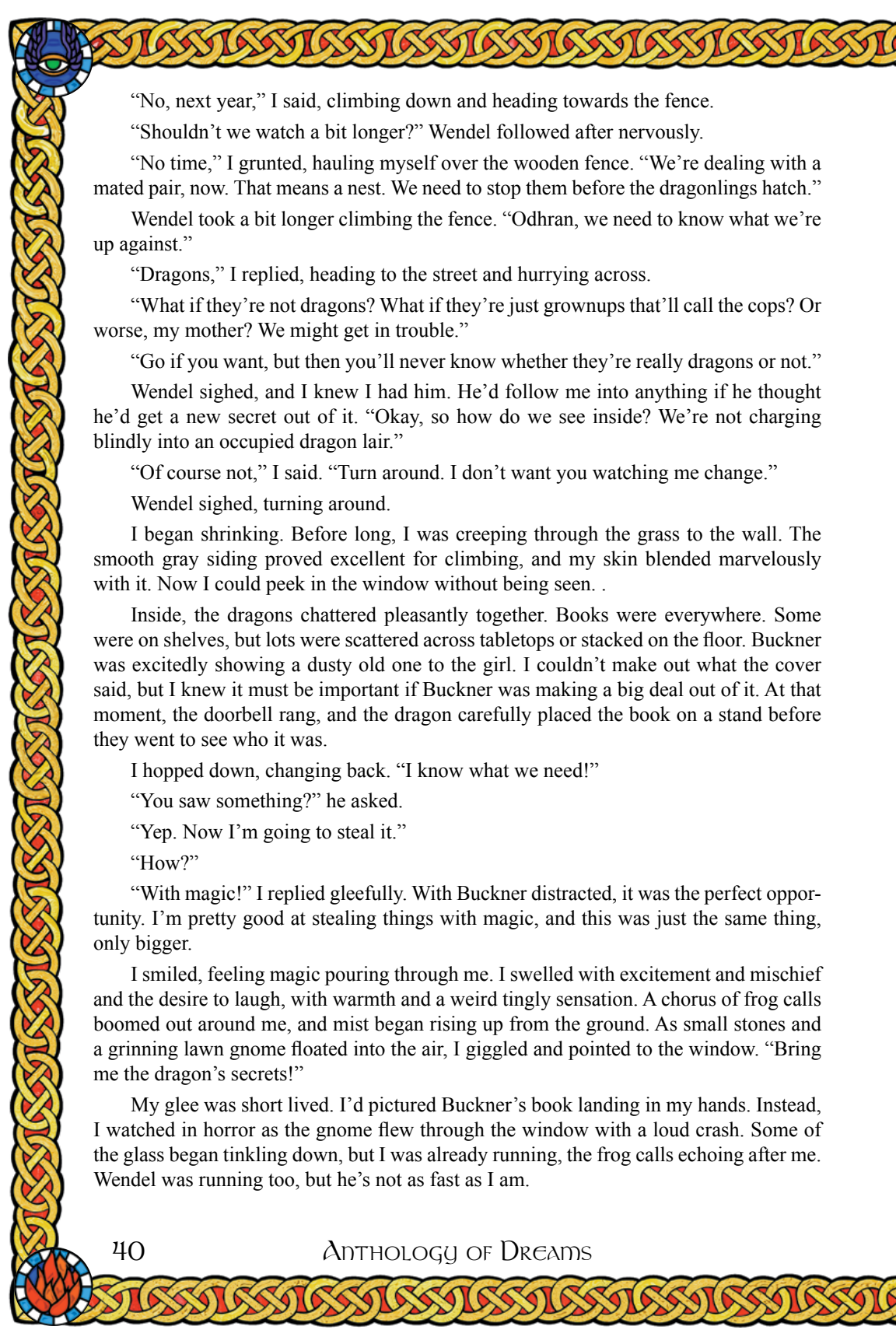
"Sidekick?!"

"Okay, partner," I said.

"Better," he replied. My sidekick's easily appeased.

"Good, let's go."

"Now?"



"No, next year," I said, climbing down and heading towards the fence.

"Shouldn't we watch a bit longer?" Wendel followed after nervously.

"No time," I grunted, hauling myself over the wooden fence. "We're dealing with a mated pair, now. That means a nest. We need to stop them before the dragonlings hatch."

Wendel took a bit longer climbing the fence. "Odhran, we need to know what we're up against."

"Dragons," I replied, heading to the street and hurrying across.

"What if they're not dragons? What if they're just grownups that'll call the cops? Or worse, my mother? We might get in trouble."

"Go if you want, but then you'll never know whether they're really dragons or not."

Wendel sighed, and I knew I had him. He'd follow me into anything if he thought he'd get a new secret out of it. "Okay, so how do we see inside? We're not charging blindly into an occupied dragon lair."

"Of course not," I said. "Turn around. I don't want you watching me change."

Wendel sighed, turning around.

I began shrinking. Before long, I was creeping through the grass to the wall. The smooth gray siding proved excellent for climbing, and my skin blended marvelously with it. Now I could peek in the window without being seen. .

Inside, the dragons chattered pleasantly together. Books were everywhere. Some were on shelves, but lots were scattered across tabletops or stacked on the floor. Buckner was excitedly showing a dusty old one to the girl. I couldn't make out what the cover said, but I knew it must be important if Buckner was making a big deal out of it. At that moment, the doorbell rang, and the dragon carefully placed the book on a stand before they went to see who it was.

I hopped down, changing back. "I know what we need!"

"You saw something?" he asked.

"Yep. Now I'm going to steal it."

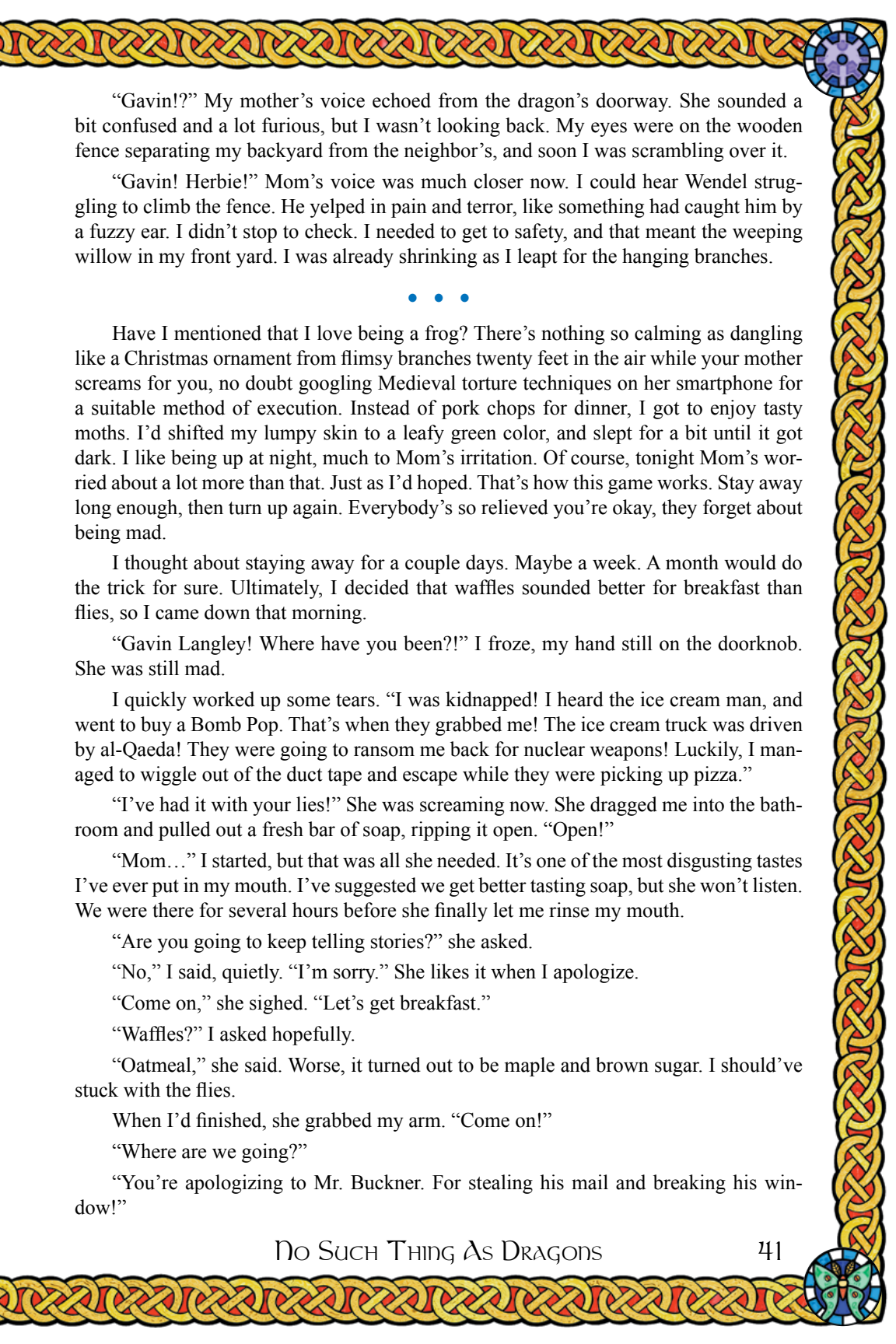
"How?"

"With magic!" I replied gleefully. With Buckner distracted, it was the perfect opportunity. I'm pretty good at stealing things with magic, and this was just the same thing, only bigger.

I smiled, feeling magic pouring through me. I swelled with excitement and mischief and the desire to laugh, with warmth and a weird tingly sensation. A chorus of frog calls boomed out around me, and mist began rising up from the ground. As small stones and a grinning lawn gnome floated into the air, I giggled and pointed to the window. "Bring me the dragon's secrets!"

My glee was short lived. I'd pictured Buckner's book landing in my hands. Instead, I watched in horror as the gnome flew through the window with a loud crash. Some of the glass began tinkling down, but I was already running, the frog calls echoing after me. Wendel was running too, but he's not as fast as I am.





“Gavin!?” My mother’s voice echoed from the dragon’s doorway. She sounded a bit confused and a lot furious, but I wasn’t looking back. My eyes were on the wooden fence separating my backyard from the neighbor’s, and soon I was scrambling over it.

“Gavin! Herbie!” Mom’s voice was much closer now. I could hear Wendel struggling to climb the fence. He yelped in pain and terror, like something had caught him by a fuzzy ear. I didn’t stop to check. I needed to get to safety, and that meant the weeping willow in my front yard. I was already shrinking as I leapt for the hanging branches.

• • •

Have I mentioned that I love being a frog? There’s nothing so calming as dangling like a Christmas ornament from flimsy branches twenty feet in the air while your mother screams for you, no doubt googling Medieval torture techniques on her smartphone for a suitable method of execution. Instead of pork chops for dinner, I got to enjoy tasty moths. I’d shifted my lumpy skin to a leafy green color, and slept for a bit until it got dark. I like being up at night, much to Mom’s irritation. Of course, tonight Mom’s worried about a lot more than that. Just as I’d hoped. That’s how this game works. Stay away long enough, then turn up again. Everybody’s so relieved you’re okay, they forget about being mad.

I thought about staying away for a couple days. Maybe a week. A month would do the trick for sure. Ultimately, I decided that waffles sounded better for breakfast than flies, so I came down that morning.

“Gavin Langley! Where have you been?!” I froze, my hand still on the doorknob. She was still mad.

I quickly worked up some tears. “I was kidnapped! I heard the ice cream man, and went to buy a Bomb Pop. That’s when they grabbed me! The ice cream truck was driven by al-Qaeda! They were going to ransom me back for nuclear weapons! Luckily, I managed to wiggle out of the duct tape and escape while they were picking up pizza.”

“I’ve had it with your lies!” She was screaming now. She dragged me into the bathroom and pulled out a fresh bar of soap, ripping it open. “Open!”

“Mom...” I started, but that was all she needed. It’s one of the most disgusting tastes I’ve ever put in my mouth. I’ve suggested we get better tasting soap, but she won’t listen. We were there for several hours before she finally let me rinse my mouth.

“Are you going to keep telling stories?” she asked.

“No,” I said, quietly. “I’m sorry.” She likes it when I apologize.

“Come on,” she sighed. “Let’s get breakfast.”


“Waffles?” I asked hopefully.

“Oatmeal,” she said. Worse, it turned out to be maple and brown sugar. I should’ve stuck with the flies.

When I’d finished, she grabbed my arm. “Come on!”

“Where are we going?”

“You’re apologizing to Mr. Buckner. For stealing his mail and breaking his window!”



"Mom, no!" I cried, struggling. If I'd been a bear or lion, I would've been strong enough to break free, but as a frog, I didn't stand a chance. "He's a dragon!"

"There's no such thing as dragons!"

And that was that. She dragged me to my doom, then rang the doorbell. As it opened, I stared into the eyes of the vicious monster.

"Hi, Mr. Buckner," she said. "This little hoodlum is my son, Gavin. He has something to say."

"Oh?" He stared at me like a cat watches a mouse dripping with ketchup.

Her grip on my wrist tightened. "I'm sorry," I said quietly. "About everything I did."

"You should be more careful, young man," he said.

"Oh, he will be. He's going to help you with chores until he pays off the damages!"

"What?!" The dragon and I seemed equally shocked.

"You heard me," she said, glaring at me.

"Mrs. Langley, this really isn't necessary," he said.

"Gavin needs to learn responsibility," she replied. "It's time to grow up."

"Mom, you can't leave me here. He's going to eat me!" I protested.

"Well, you should've thought about that before you broke his window!"

"I guess I can find something for him to do." The dragon licked his lips hungrily.

"Wonderful," she said. "Gavin, behave yourself for Mr. Buckner."

"But..." She was already leaving.

"Come inside," the dragon said, leaving the door to his lair open. It slammed shut behind me, sealing my doom.

"Look, you shouldn't eat me! I'd taste terrible. You don't know where I've been. I'm high in sugar, fat, and artificial preservatives. I'd drive your cholesterol levels through the roof!"

"I'm not going to eat you, young man," he said. "We don't do that. Would you like some Earl Grey?"

"So my blood is too common for you?!" I exclaimed. "You only eat nobles? For your information, I don't eat *any* people!"

"...Earl Grey is a tea, young man," he said, setting a small box on the table, pointing to the label. "It's flavored with bergamot. I don't eat people, either."

"But you're a dragon!"

"Yes, but we drakes don't eat anyone. We're people, like you. My name is Calog-erus."

"Redcaps are people. Doesn't stop them!"

He sighed. "This is why we keep to ourselves."

"Because you eat people!" I declared. "I'll have you know that I am Sir Odhran, Slayer of Dragons, Muncher of Sweets, Basher of Beasts! If you don't let me go, you're in big trouble!" I grabbed the nearest book, raising it in a threatening manner.

"Give me that!" he snapped, somehow finding the courage to act despite my terrifying battle stance. He snatched the book, inspecting it closely before setting it aside. "Odhran, is it?" he asked, not bothering with my title. "I'm not going to hurt you. I'd thank you to respect my books, though."

"Hands off the books, got it," I said. "What's so special about them?"

"I collect them," he said.

"Why?"

"All drakes collect something valuable. I collect rare books."

"Why? Books are boring, unless they've got pictures. Do these have pictures?"

"No, they don't," Cal said, sighing. "These books rely upon your own imagination for illustration. They were all quite valuable to their previous owners, nonetheless."

"If they were so valuable, why do you have them?"

"Most of the original owners have passed away at this point," he said.

I shuddered. My grandmother died last year. I barely survived the funeral. Whoever decided that "funeral" should start with "fun" was a cruel monster who should have his legs eaten by rats. Mom needed to carry me out, and I didn't smile again for weeks. I know people die, and it's not their fault, but did Grandma have to take a piece of me with her?

"Odhran, are you alright?" Cal seemed legitimately concerned.

"Spectacular." I wasn't crying. "Why would you want dead people's books?"

"It's not because they're dead," he replied, handing me a tissue. "I collect the books for what they meant to them in life. Each of these inspired a previous owner to make a major life change."

"Books can do that?" I asked, handing the tissue back.

"Absolutely. Inspiration comes from many sources. The written word is a particularly good vessel for inspiration."

"Why?"

"You'll understand when you're older," he said. Grownups always say things like that when they don't feel like answering a question. Apparently, dragons are no different.

"So, Cal, what's the book on the stand upstairs? The fancy one you were showing the girl dragon?"

He raised one scaly eyebrow. "You saw that, did you?"

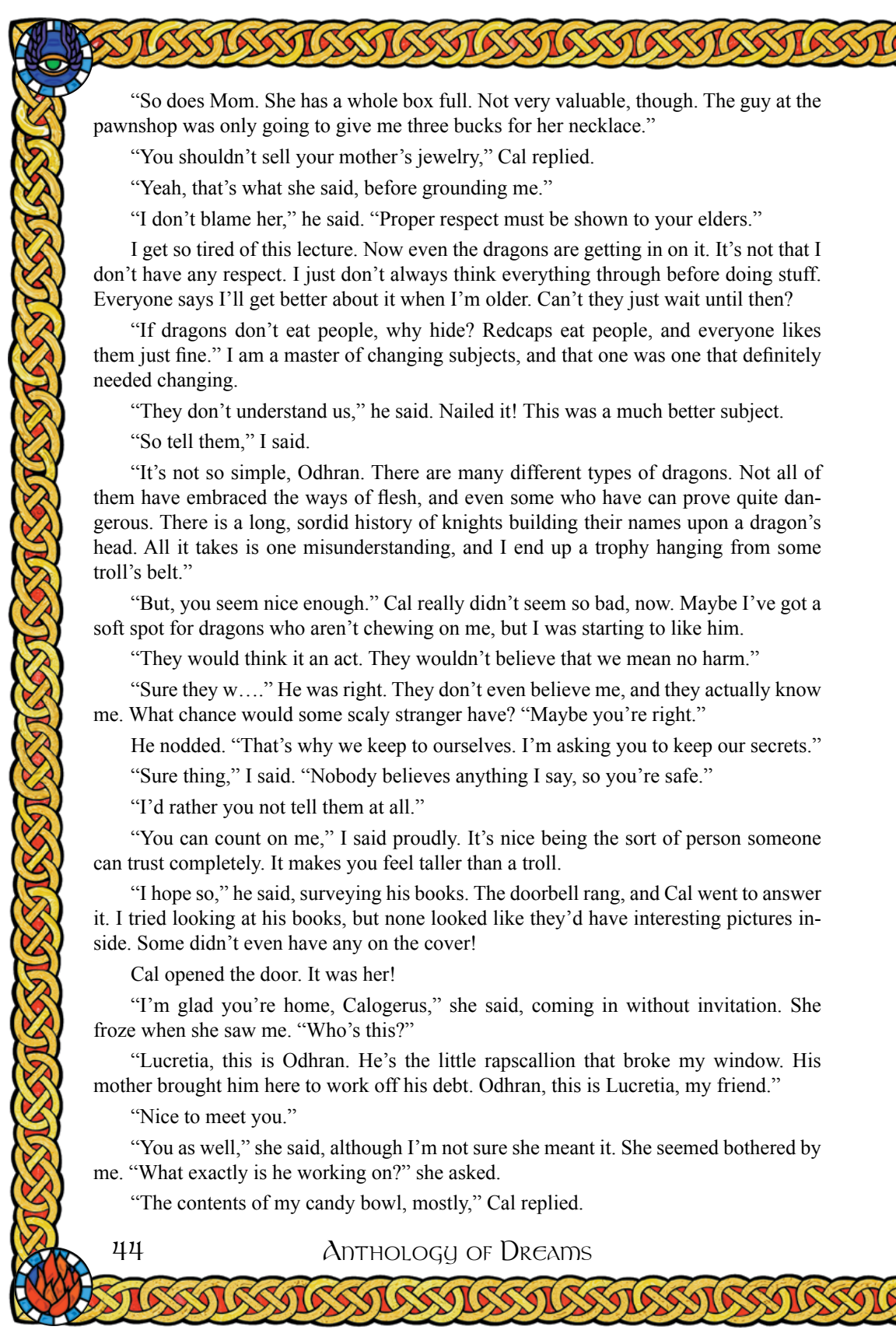
"Actually, I've got psychic powers. They're strong enough to detect your book of secrets, but not actually read it."

Cal laughed. "It's not a book of secrets," he said. "It's a first edition of *A Study in Scarlet* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The third owner of that particular copy was inspired to become a private detective after reading it for the fourth time. I'd just obtained it earlier that day, so I was eager to show Lucretia my new treasure."

"Lucretia's the girl dragon? Does she collect books, too?"

"Yes, that's her name. *She* collects jewelry."





"So does Mom. She has a whole box full. Not very valuable, though. The guy at the pawnshop was only going to give me three bucks for her necklace."

"You shouldn't sell your mother's jewelry," Cal replied.

"Yeah, that's what she said, before grounding me."

"I don't blame her," he said. "Proper respect must be shown to your elders."

I get so tired of this lecture. Now even the dragons are getting in on it. It's not that I don't have any respect. I just don't always think everything through before doing stuff. Everyone says I'll get better about it when I'm older. Can't they just wait until then?

"If dragons don't eat people, why hide? Redcaps eat people, and everyone likes them just fine." I am a master of changing subjects, and that one was one that definitely needed changing.

"They don't understand us," he said. Nailed it! This was a much better subject.

"So tell them," I said.

"It's not so simple, Odhran. There are many different types of dragons. Not all of them have embraced the ways of flesh, and even some who have can prove quite dangerous. There is a long, sordid history of knights building their names upon a dragon's head. All it takes is one misunderstanding, and I end up a trophy hanging from some troll's belt."

"But, you seem nice enough." Cal really didn't seem so bad, now. Maybe I've got a soft spot for dragons who aren't chewing on me, but I was starting to like him.

"They would think it an act. They wouldn't believe that we mean no harm."

"Sure they w...." He was right. They don't even believe me, and they actually know me. What chance would some scaly stranger have? "Maybe you're right."

He nodded. "That's why we keep to ourselves. I'm asking you to keep our secrets."

"Sure thing," I said. "Nobody believes anything I say, so you're safe."

"I'd rather you not tell them at all."

"You can count on me," I said proudly. It's nice being the sort of person someone can trust completely. It makes you feel taller than a troll.

"I hope so," he said, surveying his books. The doorbell rang, and Cal went to answer it. I tried looking at his books, but none looked like they'd have interesting pictures inside. Some didn't even have any on the cover!

Cal opened the door. It was her!

"I'm glad you're home, Calogerus," she said, coming in without invitation. She froze when she saw me. "Who's this?"

"Lucretia, this is Odhran. He's the little rascal who broke my window. His mother brought him here to work off his debt. Odhran, this is Lucretia, my friend."

"Nice to meet you."

"You as well," she said, although I'm not sure she meant it. She seemed bothered by me. "What exactly is he working on?" she asked.

"The contents of my candy bowl, mostly," Cal replied.

"Me? I don't even like Reese's Pieces. And mixing them with Peanut M&M's is a terrible idea." That was so unfair! Just assuming that I'd eat his candy without asking. If I'd been allergic to peanuts, it could've proven disastrous.

"Your hands are orange," he pointed out.

"We don't have time for this," Lucretia said. "I need to speak to you. Alone."

"Okay," he said. "Let's go into the kitchen. Odhran, stay here."

"Where else would I go?" I asked innocently, setting the lid back on the candy bowl.

Clearly, for all her talk about wanting to speak to Cal alone, she didn't really care if I overheard. They were whispering so loudly that the whole neighborhood probably heard. I barely needed to put my ear to the door.

"I found a lint worm," she said.

"Here?" Cal sounded pissed.

"He's lairing in a greenhouse at the botanical gardens."

"Fuck," he said.

"Yeah, that's too damned public. He'll end up drawing attention for sure. Then we'll need to run again."

Cal sighed. "Not if we get him running first."

"Do you have any weapons?"

"No. But if we're lucky, he'll see reason."

"Reason with a lint worm?!" She wasn't even pretending to whisper now.

"What choice do we have? If he stays, there will be victims. If we try to fight him..." He obviously didn't want to.

"Fine. I'm still bringing a sword. I'd prefer a rifle, but we've got to work with what we have."

"I'll send Odhran home," he said. When they opened the door, I was sitting in the chair, carefully picking shards of candy shell out of the bottom of the candy bowl. "Odhran, you may go home now. Thank you for your help."

"I didn't do anything," I said.

"Tell your mother that you worked off your debt. If she asks, I'll agree."

"What's a lint worm?" I asked.

"*Lindwurm*," he corrected. "It's a bad dragon. Very dangerous. Now go home."

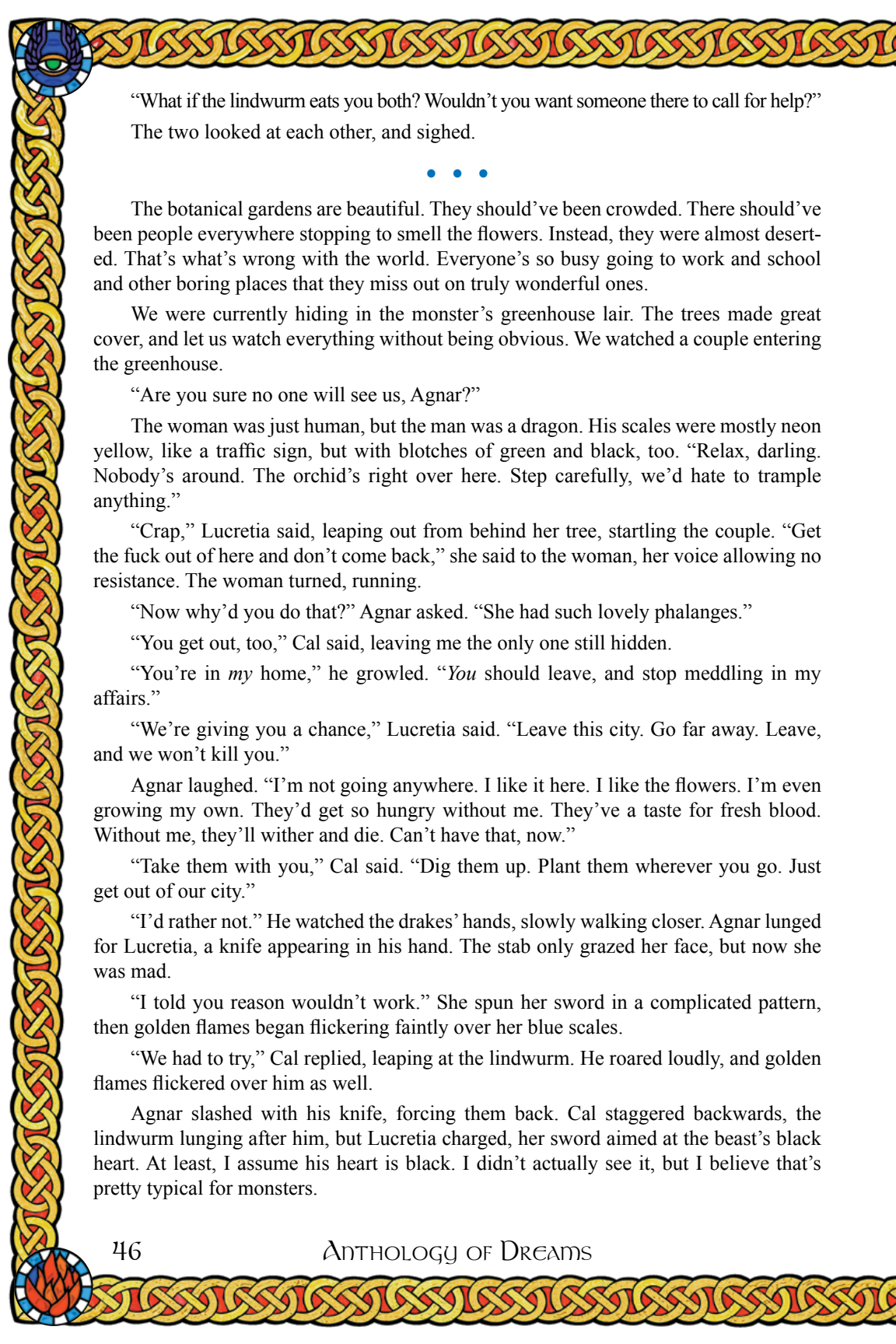
"But I can help! I'm one of the freehold's greatest knights! I've killed bogeymen, manticores, unicorns, and hydras single-handedly! The trolls all respect me, and even the redcaps know not to fuck with me!"

"Odhran! Language!" Cal exclaimed.

"We don't have time for this!" Lucretia protested. "Ditch the kid. Let's go!"

"I'm coming," I said.

"No, you're not!" Lucretia and Cal yelled together.



“What if the lindwurm eats you both? Wouldn’t you want someone there to call for help?”  
The two looked at each other, and sighed.

• • •

The botanical gardens are beautiful. They should’ve been crowded. There should’ve been people everywhere stopping to smell the flowers. Instead, they were almost deserted. That’s what’s wrong with the world. Everyone’s so busy going to work and school and other boring places that they miss out on truly wonderful ones.

We were currently hiding in the monster’s greenhouse lair. The trees made great cover, and let us watch everything without being obvious. We watched a couple entering the greenhouse.

“Are you sure no one will see us, Agnar?”

The woman was just human, but the man was a dragon. His scales were mostly neon yellow, like a traffic sign, but with blotches of green and black, too. “Relax, darling. Nobody’s around. The orchid’s right over here. Step carefully, we’d hate to trample anything.”

“Crap,” Lucretia said, leaping out from behind her tree, startling the couple. “Get the fuck out of here and don’t come back,” she said to the woman, her voice allowing no resistance. The woman turned, running.

“Now why’d you do that?” Agnar asked. “She had such lovely phalanges.”

“You get out, too,” Cal said, leaving me the only one still hidden.

“You’re in *my* home,” he growled. “*You* should leave, and stop meddling in my affairs.”

“We’re giving you a chance,” Lucretia said. “Leave this city. Go far away. Leave, and we won’t kill you.”

Agnar laughed. “I’m not going anywhere. I like it here. I like the flowers. I’m even growing my own. They’d get so hungry without me. They’ve a taste for fresh blood. Without me, they’ll wither and die. Can’t have that, now.”

“Take them with you,” Cal said. “Dig them up. Plant them wherever you go. Just get out of our city.”

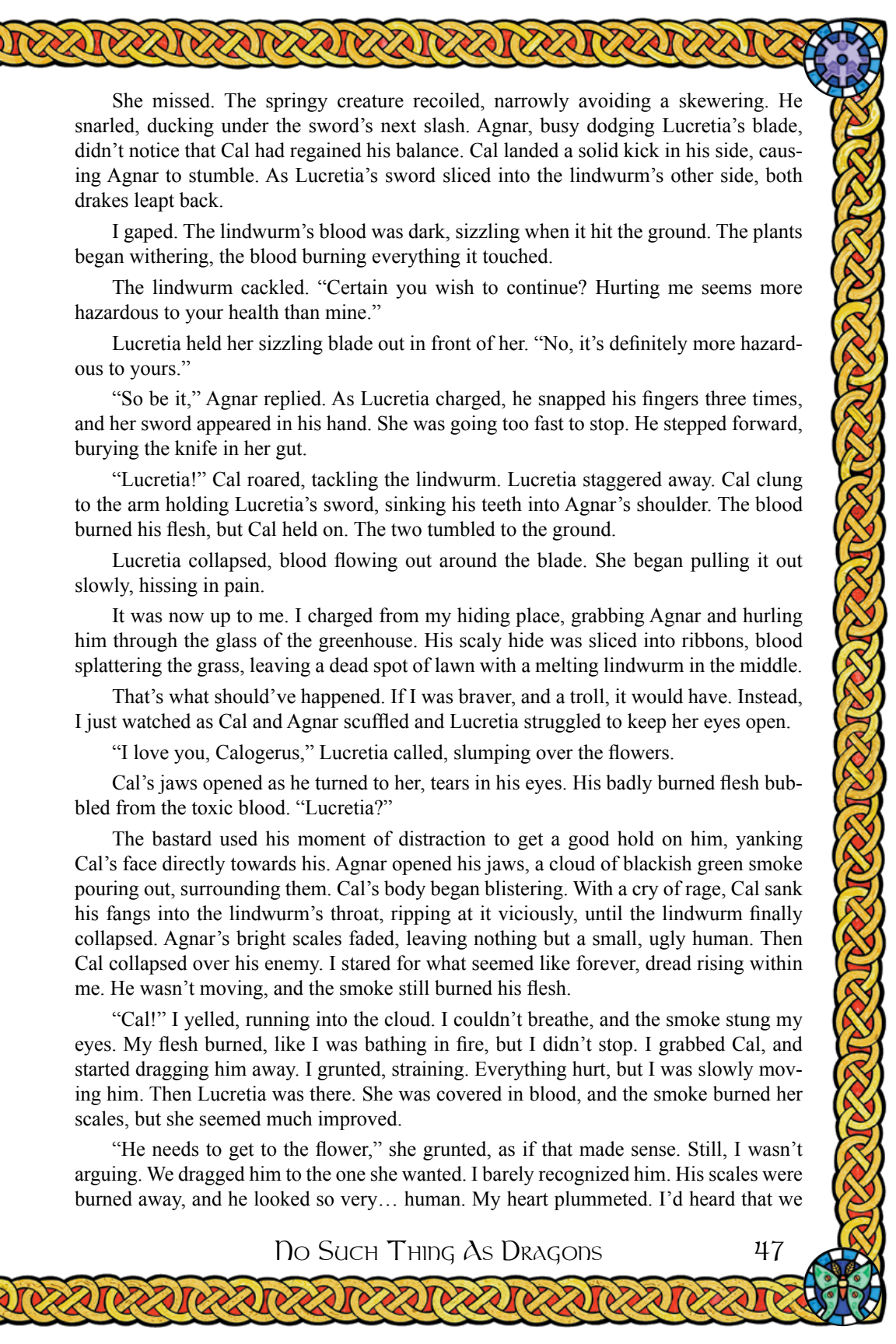
“I’d rather not.” He watched the drakes’ hands, slowly walking closer. Agnar lunged for Lucretia, a knife appearing in his hand. The stab only grazed her face, but now she was mad.

“I told you reason wouldn’t work.” She spun her sword in a complicated pattern, then golden flames began flickering faintly over her blue scales.

“We had to try,” Cal replied, leaping at the lindwurm. He roared loudly, and golden flames flickered over him as well.

Agnar slashed with his knife, forcing them back. Cal staggered backwards, the lindwurm lunging after him, but Lucretia charged, her sword aimed at the beast’s black heart. At least, I assume his heart is black. I didn’t actually see it, but I believe that’s pretty typical for monsters.





She missed. The springy creature recoiled, narrowly avoiding a skewering. He snarled, ducking under the sword's next slash. Agnar, busy dodging Lucretia's blade, didn't notice that Cal had regained his balance. Cal landed a solid kick in his side, causing Agnar to stumble. As Lucretia's sword sliced into the lindwurm's other side, both drakes leapt back.

I gaped. The lindwurm's blood was dark, sizzling when it hit the ground. The plants began withering, the blood burning everything it touched.

The lindwurm cackled. "Certain you wish to continue? Hurting me seems more hazardous to your health than mine."

Lucretia held her sizzling blade out in front of her. "No, it's definitely more hazardous to yours."

"So be it," Agnar replied. As Lucretia charged, he snapped his fingers three times, and her sword appeared in his hand. She was going too fast to stop. He stepped forward, burying the knife in her gut.

"Lucretia!" Cal roared, tackling the lindwurm. Lucretia staggered away. Cal clung to the arm holding Lucretia's sword, sinking his teeth into Agnar's shoulder. The blood burned his flesh, but Cal held on. The two tumbled to the ground.

Lucretia collapsed, blood flowing out around the blade. She began pulling it out slowly, hissing in pain.

It was now up to me. I charged from my hiding place, grabbing Agnar and hurling him through the glass of the greenhouse. His scaly hide was sliced into ribbons, blood splattering the grass, leaving a dead spot of lawn with a melting lindwurm in the middle.

That's what should've happened. If I was braver, and a troll, it would have. Instead, I just watched as Cal and Agnar scuffled and Lucretia struggled to keep her eyes open.

"I love you, Calogerus," Lucretia called, slumping over the flowers.

Cal's jaws opened as he turned to her, tears in his eyes. His badly burned flesh bubbled from the toxic blood. "Lucretia?"

The bastard used his moment of distraction to get a good hold on him, yanking Cal's face directly towards his. Agnar opened his jaws, a cloud of blackish green smoke pouring out, surrounding them. Cal's body began blistering. With a cry of rage, Cal sank his fangs into the lindwurm's throat, ripping at it viciously, until the lindwurm finally collapsed. Agnar's bright scales faded, leaving nothing but a small, ugly human. Then Cal collapsed over his enemy. I stared for what seemed like forever, dread rising within me. He wasn't moving, and the smoke still burned his flesh.

"Cal!" I yelled, running into the cloud. I couldn't breathe, and the smoke stung my eyes. My flesh burned, like I was bathing in fire, but I didn't stop. I grabbed Cal, and started dragging him away. I grunted, straining. Everything hurt, but I was slowly moving him. Then Lucretia was there. She was covered in blood, and the smoke burned her scales, but she seemed much improved.

"He needs to get to the flower," she grunted, as if that made sense. Still, I wasn't arguing. We dragged him to the one she wanted. I barely recognized him. His scales were burned away, and he looked so very... human. My heart plummeted. I'd heard that we

could lose ourselves, but it was just a scary story grumps told to make childlings behave. It wasn't something that really happened. Not to us.

"Damn it," Lucretia cursed. Then she said some other words that I would never repeat. Well, unless I thought there were no grownups around.

Cal's eyes flickered open. "What... where am I?" He looked around in confusion, his eyes struggling to focus.

"We're here!" I said, hugging him.

"Who are you?" he asked, shrugging me off.

"I'm your best friend, Odhran." Despite my fear and sorrow, I kept my voice strong. Macho, even. I wasn't whining. Anyone who says otherwise is a liar. "Don't you remember? We came here so you could fight a lindwurm!"

"A what? Kid, you're not making any sense."

"Come on, Cal! You've got to remember!"

"Odhran, he doesn't," Lucretia said.

"Who's Cal? My name's Richard."

"No, it's not!" I shouted, tears pouring from my eyes. "You're Calogerus! You're brave and smart and nice! You're the most badass dragon ever!"

"Kid, there's no such thing as dragons."

My heart shattered into a million pieces. I threw myself into Lucretia's arms. For one brief moment, I clung to her like life itself.

"Odhran, it's okay," she said, patting me on the shoulder. "He'll be okay. It just takes some time. Don't cry."

That wasn't fair. I wasn't crying. My eyes were just watering from the lindwurm's smoke. That's not to say I wasn't upset. I was. But it wasn't losing Cal that I worried about. It was myself. Cal said there was no such thing as dragons. And for just a moment, I believed him.





# BETWEEN TENSES

*By Myranda Kalis*

“You look like you need this.”

The mug held coffee black enough that light could not escape its surface and it was, in fact, exactly what Carabosse needed at that moment, along with three spoonfuls of sugar and a blueberry bagel, also thoughtfully provided. “My hero.”

“Oh, don’t say that. People will start expecting actual heroism of me and that way lies tears and heartbreak.” Stephen folded himself into the chair opposite and nursed his own cup, which smelled substantially more Irish creamy than her own. “Same thing again?”

“Almost,” Carabosse replied, and sipped. “There was something with me this time. I’m pretty sure it wasn’t friendly.”

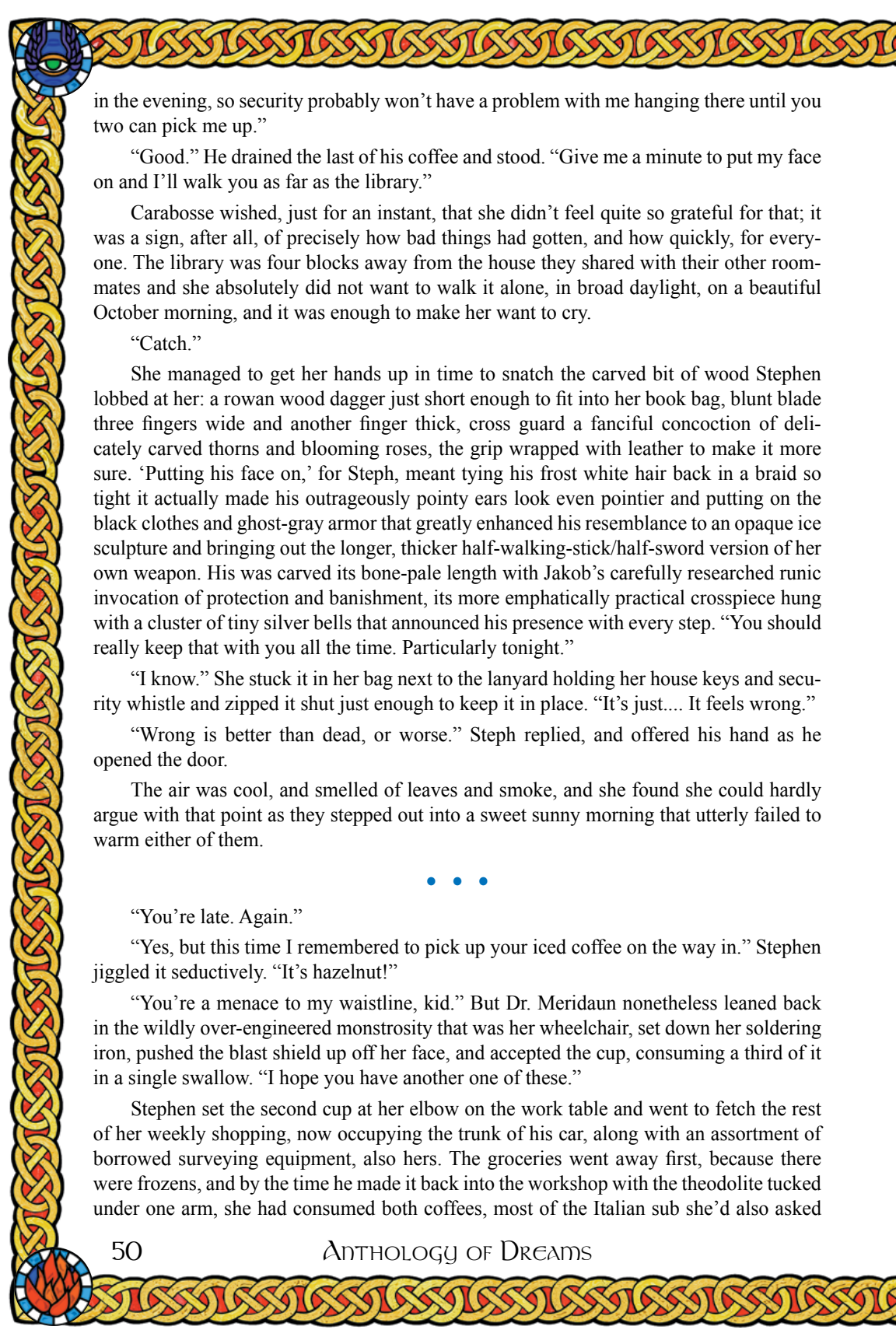
“Yeah, me too.”

Stephen looked as tired as she felt but, because of what he was, the dark circles under his eyes and the more than slightly haunted look in the eyes themselves magically transformed into the sort of things that made all the little old ladies of the Earth attempt to mother him and everyone else attempt to comfort their way into his pants. Well, okay, *almost* everyone, and given that neither was his preferred state of interaction with the rest of the world, she was perfectly inclined to forgive it. “Has Jakob called in yet?”

“Yes. His flight was delayed two hours in Seattle.” Her stomach involuntarily clenched a little. “He’s going to call with an ETA when the second leg leaves Fort Worth so I can go pick him up, but we’re likely to be out after dark.” His silver-gray eyes slid over to catch hers. “What does your schedule look like today?”

“I’ve got the morning shift at the library and then classes one to three and five to seven—lit seminar at Roark Hall.” She chewed her lip. “It’s open late for the studio art students





in the evening, so security probably won't have a problem with me hanging there until you two can pick me up."

"Good." He drained the last of his coffee and stood. "Give me a minute to put my face on and I'll walk you as far as the library."

Carabosse wished, just for an instant, that she didn't feel quite so grateful for that; it was a sign, after all, of precisely how bad things had gotten, and how quickly, for everyone. The library was four blocks away from the house they shared with their other roommates and she absolutely did not want to walk it alone, in broad daylight, on a beautiful October morning, and it was enough to make her want to cry.

"Catch."

She managed to get her hands up in time to snatch the carved bit of wood Stephen lobbed at her: a rowan wood dagger just short enough to fit into her book bag, blunt blade three fingers wide and another finger thick, cross guard a fanciful concoction of delicately carved thorns and blooming roses, the grip wrapped with leather to make it more sure. 'Putting his face on,' for Steph, meant tying his frost white hair back in a braid so tight it actually made his outrageously pointy ears look even pointier and putting on the black clothes and ghost-gray armor that greatly enhanced his resemblance to an opaque ice sculpture and bringing out the longer, thicker half-walking-stick/half-sword version of her own weapon. His was carved its bone-pale length with Jakob's carefully researched runic invocation of protection and banishment, its more emphatically practical crosspiece hung with a cluster of tiny silver bells that announced his presence with every step. "You should really keep that with you all the time. Particularly tonight."

"I know." She stuck it in her bag next to the lanyard holding her house keys and security whistle and zipped it shut just enough to keep it in place. "It's just.... It feels wrong."

"Wrong is better than dead, or worse." Steph replied, and offered his hand as he opened the door.

The air was cool, and smelled of leaves and smoke, and she found she could hardly argue with that point as they stepped out into a sweet sunny morning that utterly failed to warm either of them.


• • •

"You're late. Again."

"Yes, but this time I remembered to pick up your iced coffee on the way in." Stephen jiggled it seductively. "It's hazelnut!"

"You're a menace to my waistline, kid." But Dr. Meridaun nonetheless leaned back in the wildly over-engineered monstrosity that was her wheelchair, set down her soldering iron, pushed the blast shield up off her face, and accepted the cup, consuming a third of it in a single swallow. "I hope you have another one of these."

Stephen set the second cup at her elbow on the work table and went to fetch the rest of her weekly shopping, now occupying the trunk of his car, along with an assortment of borrowed surveying equipment, also hers. The groceries went away first, because there were frozens, and by the time he made it back into the workshop with the theodolite tucked under one arm, she had consumed both coffees, most of the Italian sub she'd also asked



for, and was daintily wiping her fingers to rid them of nacho cheese dust. “Okay, you’ve definitely graduated from menace to active threat. Lemme see what you’ve got.”

On any reasonable piece of equipment, the thing he ejected from its innards would have been called an SD card. Since it was not a reasonable piece of equipment, and neither was the woman who had made both it and the device used to read its findings, he settled for calling it a thingamawhatsis and handed it over without argument. The good doctor inserted into the side of something that was emphatically not the mutant offspring of a laptop, a heavily modified air hockey table, and a Cray cluster, which came to life with a bone-rattlingly deep hum, a hair-raising static discharge, and a smell like ozone after a summer thunderstorm. The display flickered in mid-air, building a topographic map of the area he’d spent the weekend surveying, sketching in the hills, the relative flat of the valley between, and the city itself. The last layer, overlaying all else, was the web — strands of glittering violet — curling outward over all from a central point, where they all came together at a point of such intense darkness it was almost physically painful to look upon directly.

“This...is not good.” Dr. Meridaun rolled her lower lip between two fingers. “The outermost edge of the spiral’s grown a whole mile in a week. Faster than it’s moved in the last two months put together.”

“It’s closer to Samhain than it’s been at any point in the last two months.” Stephen pointed out.

“Between you and me, I was kinda hoping that theory wouldn’t pan out. Goddamn it.” Dr. Meridaun replied, without any particular heat — more like a bone-deep weariness. Her fingers danced across the keyboard and as he watched, a series of bright silver pin-pricks appeared across the leading edge of the spiral. “I put together some more of the boundary wards — gimme your phone.” He handed it over and she plugged it into something at least nodding acquaintances with a USB port. “Follow your GPS. Plant the stakes as close as possible to the points I mapped out without, y’know, getting arrested for trespassing. It’d be kinda awkward having to bail you out. Again.”

“Stretching things a little thin, don’t you think?”

“Yes, but I’ve only got so many wards and so many hours in the day to fabricate more.” She growled. “Jake’s on his way?”

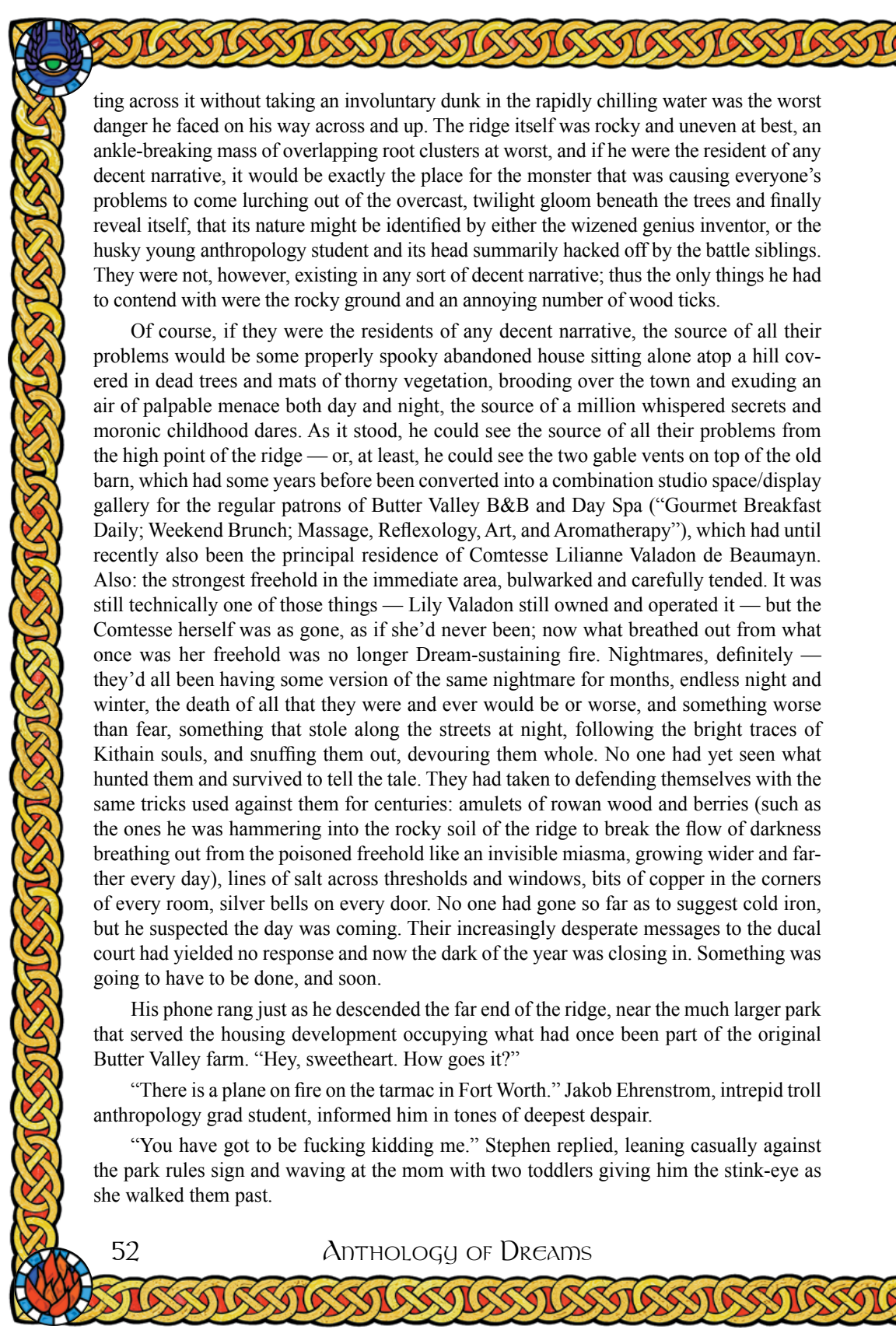
“He’ll be home tonight.” Stephen accepted his phone back and rose. “Cara’s got late classes today; if we’re not back from the airport by seven, can you arrange for someone to pick her up?”

“Of course.” She reached out and grabbed his arm, squeezed it tight. “Be careful, kid. I’m serious. You see anything under the trees out there — just run.”

He hefted the bundle of ward stakes and bent to press a kiss to the tentacular gray hair sprouting off the top of her head. “You have my word.”



The path followed the high, lightly wooded ridge line just off a part of the highway abundantly supplied with micro-parks: parking spots and picnic tables inclusive, and so Steph simply picked the most convenient and hiked up from there. A wide, shallow creek, choked in places with masses of fallen leaves, ran between the ridge and the road and get-



ting across it without taking an involuntary dunk in the rapidly chilling water was the worst danger he faced on his way across and up. The ridge itself was rocky and uneven at best, an ankle-breaking mass of overlapping root clusters at worst, and if he were the resident of any decent narrative, it would be exactly the place for the monster that was causing everyone's problems to come lurching out of the overcast, twilight gloom beneath the trees and finally reveal itself, that its nature might be identified by either the wizened genius inventor, or the husky young anthropology student and its head summarily hacked off by the battle siblings. They were not, however, existing in any sort of decent narrative; thus the only things he had to contend with were the rocky ground and an annoying number of wood ticks.

Of course, if they were the residents of any decent narrative, the source of all their problems would be some properly spooky abandoned house sitting alone atop a hill covered in dead trees and mats of thorny vegetation, brooding over the town and exuding an air of palpable menace both day and night, the source of a million whispered secrets and moronic childhood dares. As it stood, he could see the source of all their problems from the high point of the ridge — or, at least, he could see the two gable vents on top of the old barn, which had some years before been converted into a combination studio space/display gallery for the regular patrons of Butter Valley B&B and Day Spa (“Gourmet Breakfast Daily; Weekend Brunch; Massage, Reflexology, Art, and Aromatherapy”), which had until recently also been the principal residence of Comtesse Lilianne Valadon de Beaumayn. Also: the strongest freehold in the immediate area, bulwarked and carefully tended. It was still technically one of those things — Lily Valadon still owned and operated it — but the Comtesse herself was as gone, as if she'd never been; now what breathed out from what once was her freehold was no longer Dream-sustaining fire. Nightmares, definitely — they'd all been having some version of the same nightmare for months, endless night and winter, the death of all that they were and ever would be or worse, and something worse than fear, something that stole along the streets at night, following the bright traces of Kithain souls, and snuffing them out, devouring them whole. No one had yet seen what hunted them and survived to tell the tale. They had taken to defending themselves with the same tricks used against them for centuries: amulets of rowan wood and berries (such as the ones he was hammering into the rocky soil of the ridge to break the flow of darkness breathing out from the poisoned freehold like an invisible miasma, growing wider and farther every day), lines of salt across thresholds and windows, bits of copper in the corners of every room, silver bells on every door. No one had gone so far as to suggest cold iron, but he suspected the day was coming. Their increasingly desperate messages to the ducal court had yielded no response and now the dark of the year was closing in. Something was going to have to be done, and soon.

His phone rang just as he descended the far end of the ridge, near the much larger park that served the housing development occupying what had once been part of the original Butter Valley farm. “Hey, sweetheart. How goes it?”

“There is a plane on fire on the tarmac in Fort Worth.” Jakob Ehrenstrom, intrepid troll anthropology grad student, informed him in tones of deepest despair.

“You have got to be fucking kidding me.” Stephen replied, leaning casually against the park rules sign and waving at the mom with two toddlers giving him the stink-eye as she walked them past.



"I am not kidding you. In fact, I am watching it burn as we speak." In the distance, Steph could hear sirens. "They're talking about shutting down the entire airport, shuttling us out to a hotel, and putting us on the next available flights tomorrow morning."

"I'm having that feeling I get when the universe is clearly and obviously mocking all our endeavors." Mom was not giving up the death-glare and so he pushed off and began walking up the side of the road. "Are you okay?"

"Well. At least it wasn't my plane." A heavy sigh. "I'm going to email you my research documents right now, while I've still got connection."

"Sounds like a plan." He suspected nothing good would come of telling Jakob about his most recent activities *vis a vis* thumping around in the woods alone and so he kept that information to himself. "Look. Take care of yourself right now and let me know when you're on the way. I'll give everything you send me to Doc Meridaun and we'll come up with a plan. Don't worry."

"Really. Are you even serious right now with that." There was no actual question in his tone and so Steph chose not to pretend there was. "How's Cara doing?"

"Nervy as a cat with a long tail in a roomful of rocking chairs. Doing her best to cover what she can on campus during the day with protections that won't get swept up by the janitorial staff." A pause. "She's not over losing that Angstadt kid, and I don't think she's going to be any time soon."

"Give her a hug for me." The phone chimed gently in his ear and, when he looked, the little email icon scrolled across the top of the screen. "I have to go. Be safe."

"Always."

The sun was starting to dip below the ridge line by the time he reached his car, a fact he was skin-crawlingly aware of with every inch of lengthening shadow and rising cool breeze and the rattle of dry leaves across asphalt paired with the too-loud sound of his own steps on the gravel. It was with a considerable amount of relief that he slid behind the wheel and locking all the doors, pulled out his phone and immediately sent Dr. Meridaun a text.

*Jake's not going to make it. Plane on fire.* He flipped open his email, hit forward, and sent it along to the person most likely to be able to do something with it. *Sent me his research, just sent it to you.*


*You seem remarkably calm about your boyfriend's demise.* Dr. Meridaun texted back a minute later. *Received.*

Steph rolled his eyes. *Not HIS plane. Some kind of accident on the ground with a plane on fire. Check the news.*

*Well, THAT makes more sense. Where are you?* The sky over the trees began to redden with sunset.

*Just finished planting the stakes. Probably going to wait for Cara at the campus cafe. Want me to bring you anything?* He caught movement out of the corner of his eye and flicked a glance at it — uniform, blue windbreaker, bulky belt with multiple attachments. *About to get chased. Seeya in a bit.*

The cop knocked on his window and Steph rolled it down. "Sorry, officer, I was texting and I didn't want—"



He realized, almost instantly, that the appendage that came to rest on the car door only qualified as a hand in the loosest sense of the term.

• • •

The ground beneath her feet was a tangle of roots and rocks, rimed in just enough frost to make the footing slick as well as treacherous, even for her own sure hooves. She had no idea how long she'd been running but the ache in her ankles and her calves, the burn in the long muscles of her thighs, and the stitches in both her sides suggested both too long and too fast.

The forest spread out on all sides, as far as she could see in all directions, pale-barked and twisted, rising into a mass of densely interwoven branches overhead that, even leafless, blocked out all but the most fleeting glimpses of the sky, pierced by only the thinnest shafts of wan, attenuated light. She stumbled up against one and clung to it, chest heaving for air, skin crawling at the texture of the bark underneath her palms, closer to long-dead corpseflesh, cold and moist and noisome, than anything as wholesome as wood.

In the distance, something howled — howled in a voice too close to human to be properly termed bestial, the sound braided together of mindless agony and equally mindless hunger. She froze, fought to bring her breathing under control, and failed spectacularly as a second, far closer howl answered the first and, within moments, the baying echoing between the trees was that of a whole pack. She gathered herself and sprang away from the relative shelter of the bole at a full run — and it was not enough. Before she managed a dozen long-springing paces, something caught her and bore her hard to the ground. The breath left her lungs in a single painful blow and she flung her arm up reflexively to protect her throat from the densely-fanged maw she sensed, rather than saw, stooping to close around it—

Carabosse jerked awake, her stomach trying to lurch all the way up her throat from the suddenness of it, disorientation from the sleep and the sense that, in some way, she was still falling making the insides of her head swim. Someone caught her arm as she flailed and helped steady her. “Easy! Are you okay, Miss Winters?”


She reached up with her free hand and rubbed the grit and bleariness out of her eyes, blinked at the campus security guard crouched down next to where she sat in one of student lounge chairs. “I’m — yes. I’m sorry, officer, I must have dozed off.”

The officer regarded both her and the chair — which was probably bought sometime in the seventies and hadn’t been refurbished since — with a certain element of amusement. “You must’ve been pretty wiped to fall asleep in that. And if it were up to me I’d have just let you rest but, well, we’re about to close up for the night.”

Carabosse blinked again. “Wait — really? What time is it?” Not waiting for the answer, she dug out her phone. “It’s after eleven.”

“That it is. My partner’s digging the last of the studio kids out right now.” The officer offered her hand and Carabosse accepted it, her stomach knotting up, hands trying their hardest to shake. “Were you waiting for someone?”

“My brother.” She thumbed open the lock screen, took back her hand and texted as quickly as she could to both her brother and Jakob who, if they were shackled up somewhere enjoying a reunion quickie, were completely and absolutely going to die when she



got her hands on them. *WHERE ARE YOU TWO, I'M WAITING AT ROARK.*

She gathered up her bag and slung it over her shoulder, drifting toward the front doors as she waited for a reply.

Jakob replied first. *Stuck overnight in Fort Worth. Plane troubles. What's going on?*

The knot in her stomach hitched a notch tighter. *Steph was supposed to pick me up FOUR HOURS AGO. Have you heard from him?*

*I talked to him about five, five-thirty your time — sent him my research documents and told him I wouldn't be getting in tonight.* She had never hated those three floating little dots more as she watched him type. *I haven't heard from him since. Give me a minute.*

Carabosse hit speed-dial herself and stepped out into the vestibule between the inner and outer doors of Roark Hall as the sound of footsteps reached her: the rest of the building's occupants making their way up the basement-level studio space. "Pick up," she whispered, "pick up pick up pick up I will never make fun of the terrifying size difference between you and Jake again if you pick up *right now.*"

"Hello," Steph's voice on the other end and her eyes prickled with tears. "You've reached the voicemail of Stephen Winters. I can't answer right now but if you leave your name, number, and a message after the tone, I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

"Stephen Alexander Winterbourne ap Scathach, when I find you I am going to beat you senseless with your own sword." Carabosse promised his voicemail and stepped out into the cool, breezy autumn night, her hooves clicking on the pavement like gunshots as she walked, briskly, in the direction of the campus security office.

*He's not answering his cell or at the house.* Jakob texted her a moment later as she stepped inside the security office, waving silently to the officer on duty.

*I'm calling Dr. Meridaun.* It took ten rings for the phone to pick up and, when it did, the good doctor sounded both distracted and cranky and it took Carabosse a few seconds longer than usual to filter out all the invective. "Hello to you, too."

"Cara?" And now Dr. Meridaun sounded a little abashed and slightly apologetic. "Sorry, kid, it's been a long and fairly terrifying night. How're you?"

"Stephen never came to pick me up at school." Carabosse replied, bluntly. "He's not answering his phone and he's not at home and Jakob hasn't heard from him since around five this evening. D'you have any idea what he might be doing?"


Silence. The knots in Carabosse's stomach clenched even tighter and approximately doubled in size.

"I sent him out to plant some wards in the woods between Butter Valley and that housing development. That was hours ago — he texted me to let me know he was done and sent me Jake's research, said he was going to wait for you at the campus cafe and that he was about to get chased away from wherever he was parked." Another pause. "Cara—"

Carabosse took a deep, unsteady breath. "What?"

"This could be...very bad." She heard papers rustling at the other end. "If what Jakob found in all those old historical records is right, the odds are pretty good that our





semi-lamented comtesse made one of those deals that you're always warned not to make in fairy tales and the terms came due before she could figure a way to wriggle out. And whatever she dealt with is...collecting on it."

"Whatever?" Carabosse asked, because she knew Meridaun was holding something back.

"The Black Court. Probably. Maybe. There's something similar in the archive, stuff that went down during the Shattering. Historical precedent at any rate." A heavy sigh. "I'll send somebody to pick you up. I'm sorry, kid."

Howling beneath the trees, she heard a voice too human to be nothing but a beast, too bestial to be wholly and completely human any longer.

That voice, her brother's voice, echoed in the back of her mind, a dream, a warning, something that, having been seen, could still be undone.

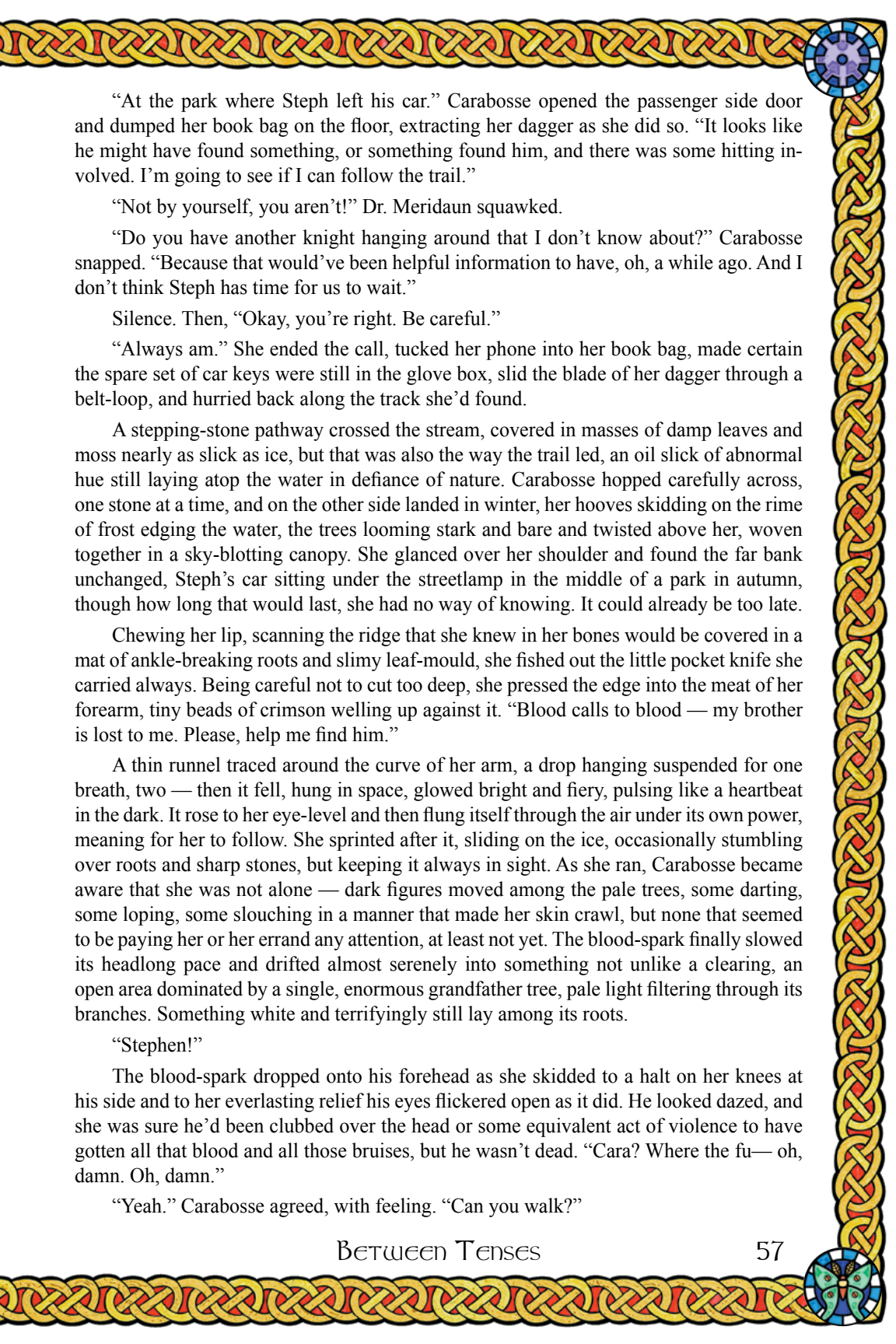
"No. Don't. I'll get in touch with you in just a minute." Taking a deep breath, she hung up the call, hitched her bag higher onto her shoulder, and stepped out into the winter-cooling night, scurrying across the security office parking lot toward the quad.

The quad was a span of lawn running through the middle of campus from one end to the other, spotted here and there with trees and shrubs and assorted pieces of sculpture capable of surviving exposure to northeastern winters, crossed in three places by well-lit and paved footpaths. Carabosse picked the one at the far end of the quad, generally only used during the brighter hours of the day because it was furthest from the nearest light pole but not entirely darkened. It took her a moment to find a suitably sized rock and eventually had to settle for one from a planting boarder, stuffing it in her pocket while she drew a hopscotch grid, humming under her breath as she did so. She could feel the magic humming in her veins as she tossed the rock, glittering already under her hooves as she took the first hop. "One two, buckle my shoe, three four, close the door, five six, pick up sticks, seven eight, close the—"

Gravel crunched under her feet as she came to a halt, nearly stumbling into the side of Steph's car as she did so. It took her for a moment for her eyes to adjust to the sudden change in light — it was brighter where she stood than it was on the quad, the car parked directly under the tiny parking lot's lone light pole — but once they did, she could see at once at least part of what had happened. For one, there'd clearly been a fight. The gravel was spattered in tiny pools of tarry, stinking liquid — not blood, but something close enough to it that the decimal places hardly mattered. The side of the car closest had several new dents and scratches and she was sure the roof did, too. Steph's phone sat clearly visible on the driver's seat, his own book satchel on the passenger side, none of the doors locked. On the far side of the car, the splatters continued, thicker and less scattered, the gravel raked in a pair of long furrows until they vanished in the undergrowth on the bank of the stream that passed nearby.

Carabosse's phone rang and the sound nearly shot her out of her own skin, so tightly strung were every single one of her nerves, and she nearly dropped it as she thumbed the screen open. "Doc?"

"Where the Hell are you?" Dr. Meridaun was audibly distressed, so much so that she wasn't even really swearing, per se.



“At the park where Steph left his car.” Carabosse opened the passenger side door and dumped her book bag on the floor, extracting her dagger as she did so. “It looks like he might have found something, or something found him, and there was some hitting involved. I’m going to see if I can follow the trail.”

“Not by yourself, you aren’t!” Dr. Meridaun squawked.

“Do you have another knight hanging around that I don’t know about?” Carabosse snapped. “Because that would’ve been helpful information to have, oh, a while ago. And I don’t think Steph has time for us to wait.”

Silence. Then, “Okay, you’re right. Be careful.”

“Always am.” She ended the call, tucked her phone into her book bag, made certain the spare set of car keys were still in the glove box, slid the blade of her dagger through a belt-loop, and hurried back along the track she’d found.

A stepping-stone pathway crossed the stream, covered in masses of damp leaves and moss nearly as slick as ice, but that was also the way the trail led, an oil slick of abnormal hue still laying atop the water in defiance of nature. Carabosse hopped carefully across, one stone at a time, and on the other side landed in winter, her hooves skidding on the rime of frost edging the water, the trees looming stark and bare and twisted above her, woven together in a sky-blotting canopy. She glanced over her shoulder and found the far bank unchanged, Steph’s car sitting under the streetlamp in the middle of a park in autumn, though how long that would last, she had no way of knowing. It could already be too late.

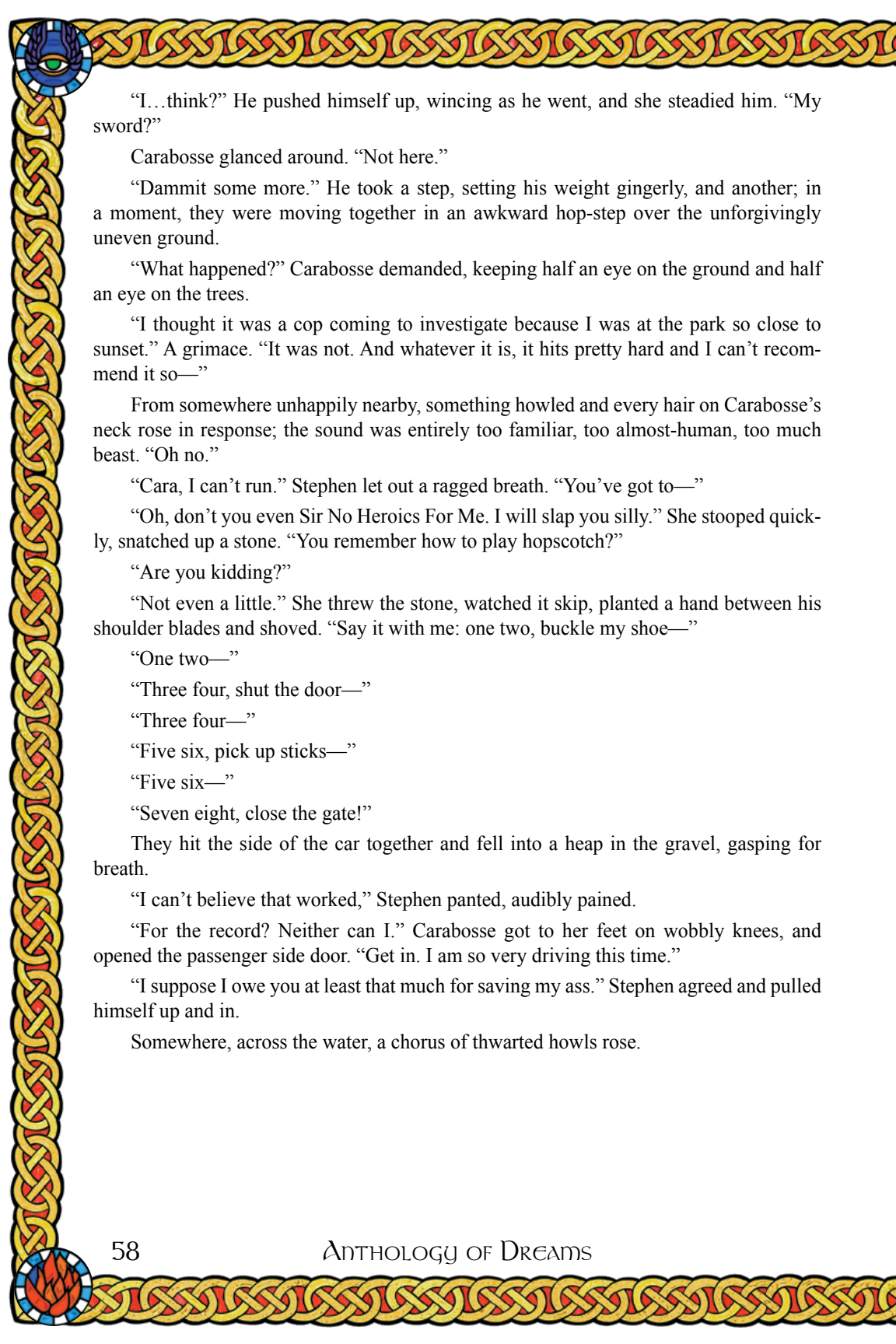
Chewing her lip, scanning the ridge that she knew in her bones would be covered in a mat of ankle-breaking roots and slimy leaf-mould, she fished out the little pocket knife she carried always. Being careful not to cut too deep, she pressed the edge into the meat of her forearm, tiny beads of crimson welling up against it. “Blood calls to blood — my brother is lost to me. Please, help me find him.”

A thin runnel traced around the curve of her arm, a drop hanging suspended for one breath, two — then it fell, hung in space, glowed bright and fiery, pulsing like a heartbeat in the dark. It rose to her eye-level and then flung itself through the air under its own power, meaning for her to follow. She sprinted after it, sliding on the ice, occasionally stumbling over roots and sharp stones, but keeping it always in sight. As she ran, Carabosse became aware that she was not alone — dark figures moved among the pale trees, some darting, some loping, some slouching in a manner that made her skin crawl, but none that seemed to be paying her or her errand any attention, at least not yet. The blood-spark finally slowed its headlong pace and drifted almost serenely into something not unlike a clearing, an open area dominated by a single, enormous grandfather tree, pale light filtering through its branches. Something white and terrifyingly still lay among its roots.

“Stephen!”

The blood-spark dropped onto his forehead as she skidded to a halt on her knees at his side and to her everlasting relief his eyes flickered open as it did. He looked dazed, and she was sure he’d been clubbed over the head or some equivalent act of violence to have gotten all that blood and all those bruises, but he wasn’t dead. “Cara? Where the fu— oh, damn. Oh, damn.”

“Yeah.” Carabosse agreed, with feeling. “Can you walk?”



"I...think?" He pushed himself up, wincing as he went, and she steadied him. "My sword?"

Carabosse glanced around. "Not here."

"Dammit some more." He took a step, setting his weight gingerly, and another; in a moment, they were moving together in an awkward hop-step over the unforgivingly uneven ground.

"What happened?" Carabosse demanded, keeping half an eye on the ground and half an eye on the trees.

"I thought it was a cop coming to investigate because I was at the park so close to sunset." A grimace. "It was not. And whatever it is, it hits pretty hard and I can't recommend it so—"

From somewhere unhappily nearby, something howled and every hair on Carabosse's neck rose in response; the sound was entirely too familiar, too almost-human, too much beast. "Oh no."

"Cara, I can't run." Stephen let out a ragged breath. "You've got to—"

"Oh, don't you even Sir No Heroics For Me. I will slap you silly." She stooped quickly, snatched up a stone. "You remember how to play hopscotch?"

"Are you kidding?"

"Not even a little." She threw the stone, watched it skip, planted a hand between his shoulder blades and shoved. "Say it with me: one two, buckle my shoe—"

"One two—"

"Three four, shut the door—"

"Three four—"

"Five six, pick up sticks—"

"Five six—"

"Seven eight, close the gate!"

They hit the side of the car together and fell into a heap in the gravel, gasping for breath.

"I can't believe that worked," Stephen panted, audibly pained.

"For the record? Neither can I." Carabosse got to her feet on wobbly knees, and opened the passenger side door. "Get in. I am so very driving this time."

"I suppose I owe you at least that much for saving my ass." Stephen agreed and pulled himself up and in.

Somewhere, across the water, a chorus of thwarted howls rose.





# WHEN I GROW UP

*By Julia Papke*

The chorus kicked in, loud and raucous, and Marks joined in at the top of her lungs, gunning the engine in time to the music. Their will o' the wisp danced brightly in the road in front of her.

Her passenger, for his part, grabbed the oh-shit handle. "Speed limits, Marks," he pleaded. She grinned. "You were not meant for a life of danger," she said.

"What danger is that? Besides your driving, I mean. We're basically the Kithain equivalent of those people who bid on storage units," he said, rolling his eyes. She couldn't see it, because she was driving, but she could hear them roll.

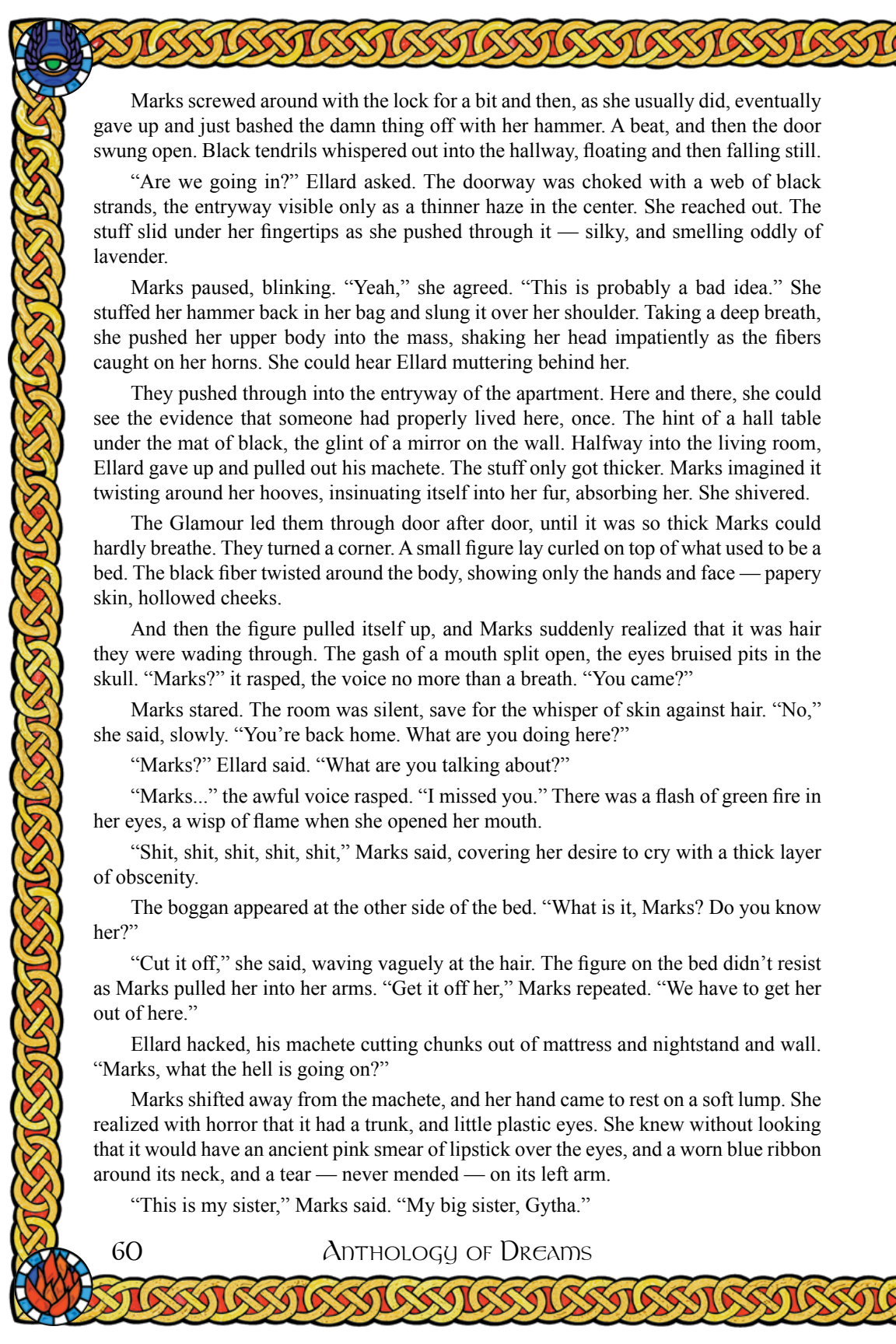
"But for magical storage units," she said. "It's a life of magical danger." They weren't actually storage units; they were mostly shitty apartments, and sometimes random spots in the city, and that one time down a storm drain. Ellard would do his scrying thing, and come up with somewhere a useful source of Glamour was hanging out waiting to be found, and they'd go look for it. Sometimes there was danger. Surely, he couldn't have forgotten that time with the griffin.

Ellard muttered something. It might have been something like "your face is a life of magical danger," but it was hard to tell over the music.

Marks turned, slid the car into a parking spot, and killed the engine. Shirley Manson's voice died mid-word. Ellard leaped out, following the wisp before it could flit out of sight, and Marks jumped after him.

• • •

They found it on the third floor: number 32. The wisp hovered around the door before melting into the wall. Even Marks could feel something wild behind the door, and Ellard looked pale under his plum suit jacket as he ran his hands against the walls.



Marks screwed around with the lock for a bit and then, as she usually did, eventually gave up and just bashed the damn thing off with her hammer. A beat, and then the door swung open. Black tendrils whispered out into the hallway, floating and then falling still.

“Are we going in?” Ellard asked. The doorway was choked with a web of black strands, the entryway visible only as a thinner haze in the center. She reached out. The stuff slid under her fingertips as she pushed through it — silky, and smelling oddly of lavender.

Marks paused, blinking. “Yeah,” she agreed. “This is probably a bad idea.” She stuffed her hammer back in her bag and slung it over her shoulder. Taking a deep breath, she pushed her upper body into the mass, shaking her head impatiently as the fibers caught on her horns. She could hear Ellard muttering behind her.

They pushed through into the entryway of the apartment. Here and there, she could see the evidence that someone had properly lived here, once. The hint of a hall table under the mat of black, the glint of a mirror on the wall. Halfway into the living room, Ellard gave up and pulled out his machete. The stuff only got thicker. Marks imagined it twisting around her hooves, insinuating itself into her fur, absorbing her. She shivered.

The Glamour led them through door after door, until it was so thick Marks could hardly breathe. They turned a corner. A small figure lay curled on top of what used to be a bed. The black fiber twisted around the body, showing only the hands and face — papery skin, hollowed cheeks.

And then the figure pulled itself up, and Marks suddenly realized that it was hair they were wading through. The gash of a mouth split open, the eyes bruised pits in the skull. “Marks?” it rasped, the voice no more than a breath. “You came?”

Marks stared. The room was silent, save for the whisper of skin against hair. “No,” she said, slowly. “You’re back home. What are you doing here?”

“Marks?” Ellard said. “What are you talking about?”

“Marks...” the awful voice rasped. “I missed you.” There was a flash of green fire in her eyes, a wisp of flame when she opened her mouth.

“Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit,” Marks said, covering her desire to cry with a thick layer of obscenity.

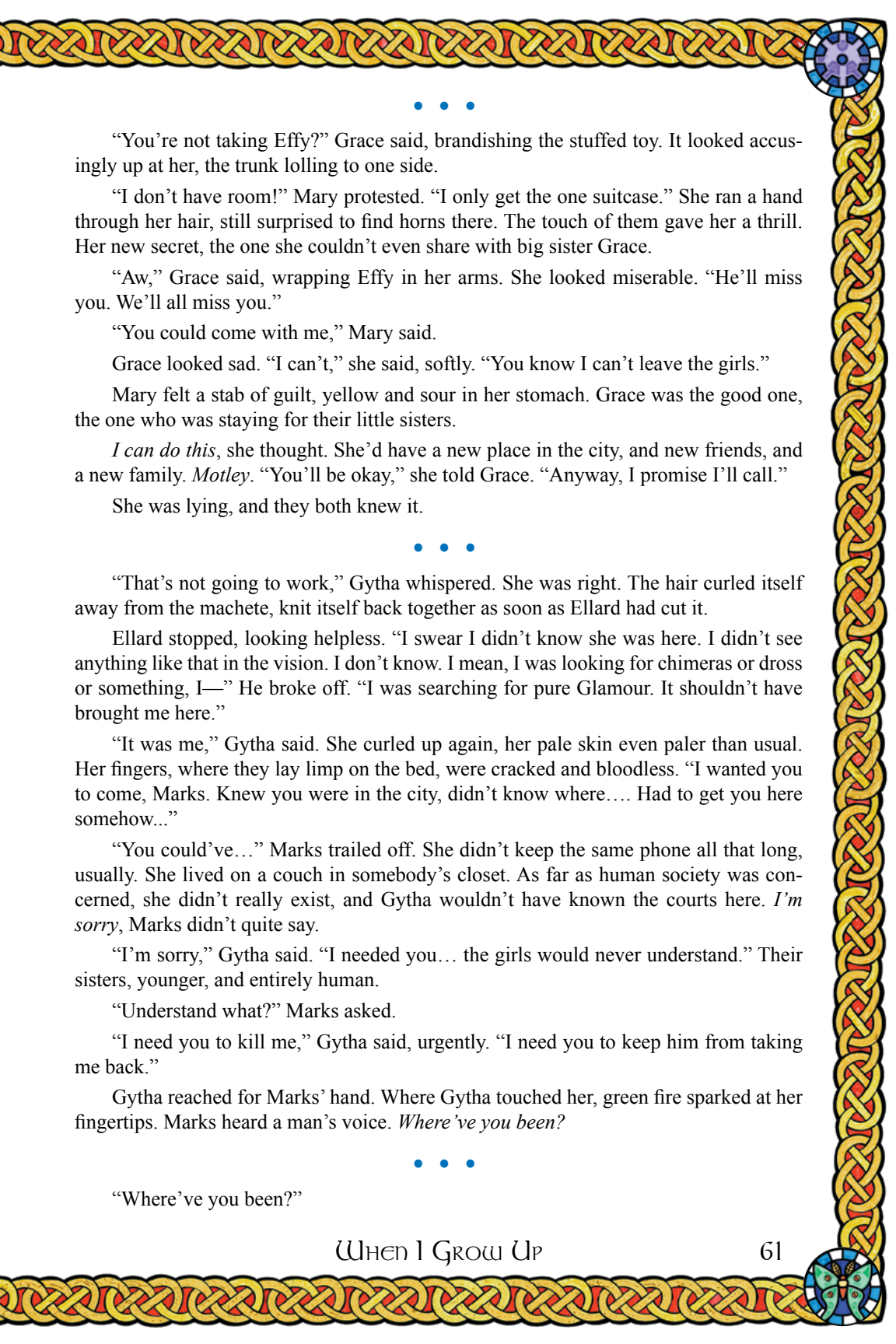
The boggan appeared at the other side of the bed. “What is it, Marks? Do you know her?”

“Cut it off,” she said, waving vaguely at the hair. The figure on the bed didn’t resist as Marks pulled her into her arms. “Get it off her,” Marks repeated. “We have to get her out of here.”

Ellard hacked, his machete cutting chunks out of mattress and nightstand and wall. “Marks, what the hell is going on?”

Marks shifted away from the machete, and her hand came to rest on a soft lump. She realized with horror that it had a trunk, and little plastic eyes. She knew without looking that it would have an ancient pink smear of lipstick over the eyes, and a worn blue ribbon around its neck, and a tear — never mended — on its left arm.

“This is my sister,” Marks said. “My big sister, Gytha.”



“You’re not taking Effy?” Grace said, brandishing the stuffed toy. It looked accusingly up at her, the trunk lolling to one side.

“I don’t have room!” Mary protested. “I only get the one suitcase.” She ran a hand through her hair, still surprised to find horns there. The touch of them gave her a thrill. Her new secret, the one she couldn’t even share with big sister Grace.

“Aw,” Grace said, wrapping Effy in her arms. She looked miserable. “He’ll miss you. We’ll all miss you.”

“You could come with me,” Mary said.

Grace looked sad. “I can’t,” she said, softly. “You know I can’t leave the girls.”

Mary felt a stab of guilt, yellow and sour in her stomach. Grace was the good one, the one who was staying for their little sisters.

*I can do this*, she thought. She’d have a new place in the city, and new friends, and a new family. *Motley*. “You’ll be okay,” she told Grace. “Anyway, I promise I’ll call.”

She was lying, and they both knew it.

“That’s not going to work,” Gytha whispered. She was right. The hair curled itself away from the machete, knit itself back together as soon as Ellard had cut it.

Ellard stopped, looking helpless. “I swear I didn’t know she was here. I didn’t see anything like that in the vision. I don’t know. I mean, I was looking for chimeras or dross or something, I—” He broke off. “I was searching for pure Glamour. It shouldn’t have brought me here.”

“It was me,” Gytha said. She curled up again, her pale skin even paler than usual. Her fingers, where they lay limp on the bed, were cracked and bloodless. “I wanted you to come, Marks. Knew you were in the city, didn’t know where.... Had to get you here somehow...”

“You could’ve...” Marks trailed off. She didn’t keep the same phone all that long, usually. She lived on a couch in somebody’s closet. As far as human society was concerned, she didn’t really exist, and Gytha wouldn’t have known the courts here. *I’m sorry*, Marks didn’t quite say.

“I’m sorry,” Gytha said. “I needed you... the girls would never understand.” Their sisters, younger, and entirely human.


“Understand what?” Marks asked.

“I need you to kill me,” Gytha said, urgently. “I need you to keep him from taking me back.”

Gytha reached for Marks’ hand. Where Gytha touched her, green fire sparked at her fingertips. Marks heard a man’s voice. *Where’ve you been?*

“Where’ve you been?”





*Shit.* Mary tensed up, turned around, smiled. “Studying with Caitlyn,” she said. It was kind of true.

“You’re lying to me,” he said, his breath reeking of scotch. “You’re always lying to me!” He grabbed her by the shoulders, shoved her at the wall.

Grace was there, somehow. “Go to your room,” she whispered, “I’ll talk to him.”

Mary ran. She shut the door and turned up the music. She didn’t want to listen to what came next.

• • •

Marks yanked her hand away.

“It’s my fault,” Gytha repeated. “But you’re here. You won’t let him get out.”

“Who’s ‘him’?” Ellard asked. He ran his hands over the raw silk of his suit jacket, feeling for the texture of it, the way he always did when he was nervous.

“My dad.” Marks said. “I think she means my dad.”

“Your— ah.” Marks didn’t talk about her family, for pretty much the same reason Ellard didn’t.

“Gytha,” she said, softly. “He’s already dead.”

Gytha made a low rasping sound. It might have been laughter.

“Is he?” she asked.

• • •

“Doesn’t family mean *anything* to you, Mary?” Her mother’s voice sounded scratchy, coming out of the computer speakers. She might have been crying.

“Marks,” she corrected, absently, staring out the window.

“That’s not the point. And look at me when I’m talking to you.”

Marks looked back at the screen. “I’m not coming back,” she repeated.

“He’s dying,” her mother whispered, as though it were an ugly, embarrassing secret. “You might never see him again.”

“Good,” Marks snarled. She slammed the laptop shut.

Her phone rang about thirty seconds later.

“I’m not changing my mind,” Marks said.

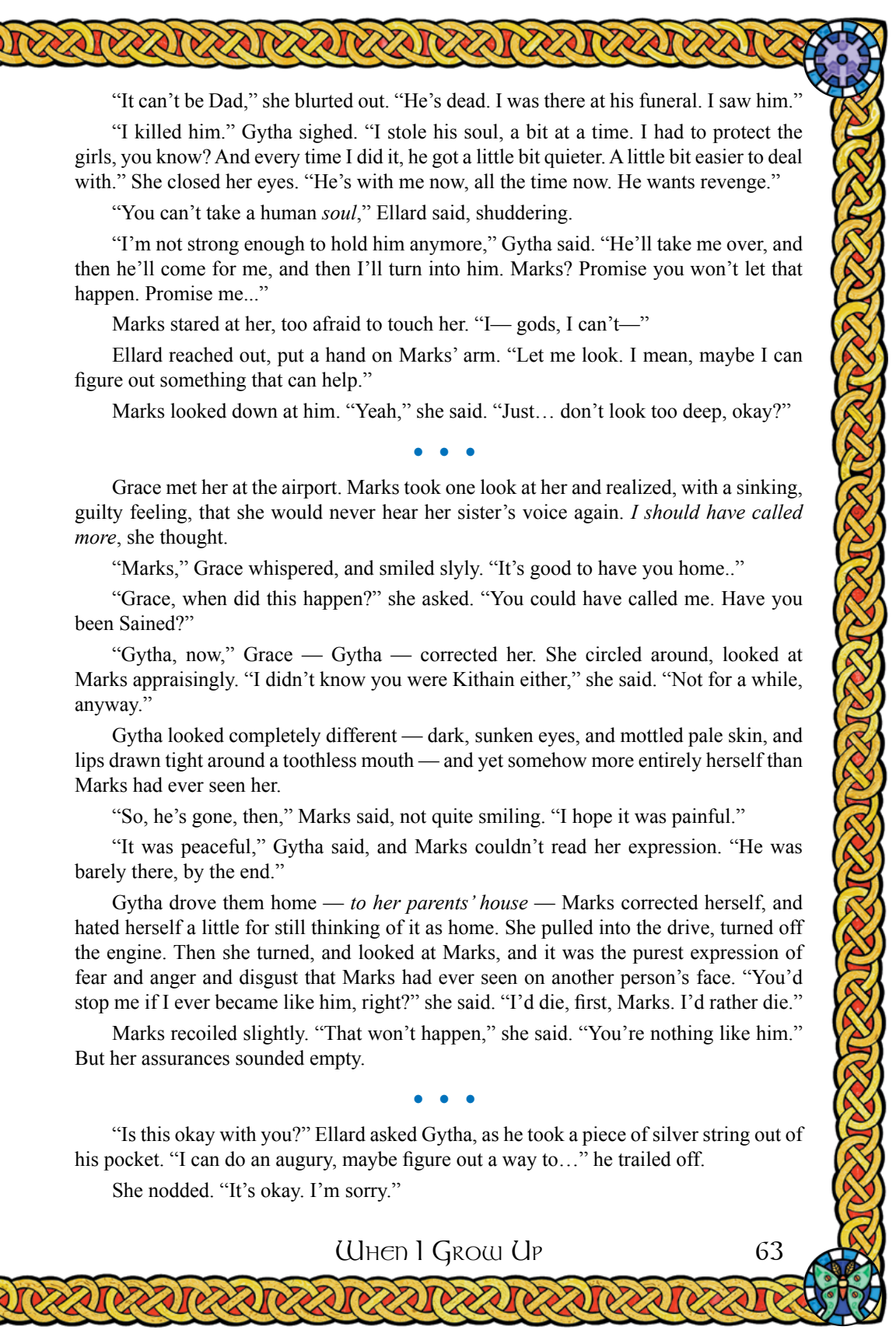
“I know,” Grace answered, her voice oddly quiet. She was silent for a long moment, and Marks wasn’t sure what to say.

“Will you come for the funeral?” Grace asked, finally. “Not for him. For me.”

“Yeah,” Marks said, guilty. “Fine.”

• • •

“Marks, there’s something... she’s not right. She’s not forgetting herself; it’s just emptiness.” Ellard reached out tentatively with the sweeping gesture that he always made when he was kenning.



"It can't be Dad," she blurted out. "He's dead. I was there at his funeral. I saw him."

"I killed him." Gytha sighed. "I stole his soul, a bit at a time. I had to protect the girls, you know? And every time I did it, he got a little bit quieter. A little bit easier to deal with." She closed her eyes. "He's with me now, all the time now. He wants revenge."

"You can't take a human *soul*," Ellard said, shuddering.

"I'm not strong enough to hold him anymore," Gytha said. "He'll take me over, and then he'll come for me, and then I'll turn into him. Marks? Promise you won't let that happen. Promise me..."

Marks stared at her, too afraid to touch her. "I— gods, I can't—"

Ellard reached out, put a hand on Marks' arm. "Let me look. I mean, maybe I can figure out something that can help."

Marks looked down at him. "Yeah," she said. "Just... don't look too deep, okay?"

• • •

Grace met her at the airport. Marks took one look at her and realized, with a sinking, guilty feeling, that she would never hear her sister's voice again. *I should have called more*, she thought.

"Marks," Grace whispered, and smiled slyly. "It's good to have you home.."

"Grace, when did this happen?" she asked. "You could have called me. Have you been Sained?"

"Gytha, now," Grace — Gytha — corrected her. She circled around, looked at Marks appraisingly. "I didn't know you were Kithain either," she said. "Not for a while, anyway."

Gytha looked completely different — dark, sunken eyes, and mottled pale skin, and lips drawn tight around a toothless mouth — and yet somehow more entirely herself than Marks had ever seen her.

"So, he's gone, then," Marks said, not quite smiling. "I hope it was painful."

"It was peaceful," Gytha said, and Marks couldn't read her expression. "He was barely there, by the end."


Gytha drove them home — *to her parents' house* — Marks corrected herself, and hated herself a little for still thinking of it as home. She pulled into the drive, turned off the engine. Then she turned, and looked at Marks, and it was the purest expression of fear and anger and disgust that Marks had ever seen on another person's face. "You'd stop me if I ever became like him, right?" she said. "I'd die, first, Marks. I'd rather die."

Marks recoiled slightly. "That won't happen," she said. "You're nothing like him." But her assurances sounded empty.

• • •

"Is this okay with you?" Ellard asked Gytha, as he took a piece of silver string out of his pocket. "I can do an augury, maybe figure out a way to..." he trailed off.

She nodded. "It's okay. I'm sorry."



Ellard cut off a strand of Gytha's hair and braided it onto the string before it could reknit. Then he looped the string around Gytha's wrist, and held out his hand to Marks. "You too," he said.

"I'm not—" she protested. "I'm not part of this."

He looked up at her, and nodded at her wrist. She laid it in his hand, and he tied the string around. As he knotted it, she felt a sick twist in her stomach.

He looped his own wrist into the string, and then held out his other hand in a reaching motion. Glamour flowed along the string, and Marks fought the desire to pull away. It reached her, encircled her, and dragged her under.

• • •

*Does this look clean to you?* he asked, his hand clenched around the back of her neck. *Look at this! You'll have to do it again!*

And then someone pulled her away. Ellard's hand was cool and soft and comforting in hers. *Don't let him pull you in,* he said. *Go. Find the answer. Explain it to me.* He released her, and she flew away, her wings beating against the wind.

Gytha stood over their father, and Marks could see her fear and her rage and her hopelessness. They hovered, smirking, around her head. As Marks watched, Gytha reached for them, pushed them at their father. He arched, and the Glamour flowed out of him, sinking into Gytha's skin. Marks dropped, becoming small, lighting on Gytha's shoulder as she turned away.

The Glamour hadn't joined with Gytha like it ought. It floated, just under her skin, looking oily and ugly and dark. Gytha turned to Marks, her face too large. *I couldn't bear to take him into myself,* she said.

And then Marks was smaller still, and her father was shouting, punching a wall. He turned. His face was fuzzy and indistinct. *You'll never be free of me,* he said.

Marks turned to Ellard. *Why is he in pieces?* she asked. Her father's arm detached and wandered away from them.

*That's a good question,* Ellard said. He was dressed in the suit he'd worn the night they'd met: tan and teal pinstripes and a pale blue shirt. *I wonder where he's going?*

Marks turned to see. Suddenly, her father was there, in front of her, close enough to touch, but still blurry. She screamed, frozen in place. *She buried me,* he said. *She left me. But I'll never let her go.*

And then Ellard was the one directly in front of him, and Marks was off to the side. Ellard reached into the apparition's chest and pulled. Strand after strand of black hair came out.

*That's odd,* Ellard said.

Marks curled into a ball and sobbed.

• • •

She came out of it suddenly. Ellard's fingers were still on her wrist where he'd untied her. "Well, that was helpful," he said.



“Did you see the same vision I did?” she protested, bitterly.

“Probably not,” he said, shrugging.

Gytha was curled in on herself. “I’m sorry,” she breathed. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry—”

Ellard cleared his throat. “She Ravaged him,” he said. “Your father. Again, and again. She’s right that it’s probably what killed him. Humans get that way, when you take all their Glamour. They just... stop.”

“Okay,” Marks said. “Isn’t that Art supposed to tell you the future? Like, what we should do about it?”

Ellard shook his head. “It’s all mixed together, Marks. But I do know what you should do. You must go into the Dreaming. She cut out a piece of herself and left it there, along with... whatever she made from his Glamour. Without it, she’s dying.”

“Shouldn’t she come with us?” Marks asked. Gytha was still muttering to herself.

“Look at her,” Ellard said. “She can’t. But... she’s still connected to the place she buried it. Follow her hair. It should lead you there.”

“It’s not *that* long,” Marks said.

“Look again,” Ellard told her, and when she looked, she saw that it stretched farther than she could see. It was still inside the room, but went so far beyond it. She shook her head.

“Go on,” Ellard said, sighing. “Somebody has to look after her. I’ll stay. You go.”

Marks looked back at Gytha one more time. She remembered lying in the bottom bunk at night, listening to Gytha tell her stories about monsters and gods, softly, so no one would hear.


“I’m going,” she said. She grabbed his machete and sliced a hole in the mat of hair. She let Glamour flow into it, tearing a hole through the walls of the mundane world. She pulled the sides of the hole open and dropped through. When she was gone, it knit closed again, as if she’d never been there.

• • •

Marks stumbled out onto a dim, silvery path strewn with black hair. *Well, thank fuck for that*, she thought. Rule Number One of traveling in the Dreaming: *stay on the Silver Path*. Rule Zero was probably: *don’t rip holes into the Dreaming so you start off gods-know-where and you get lost forever*. *Dumbass*. But she’d gotten lucky.

She paused, reached down, and pulled up a hank of Gytha’s hair. It wove itself around her wrist, and then it wasn’t hair at all. It was the black leather cuff that Marks used to steal out of Gytha’s jewelry box. A silver chain led from the cuff into... nowhere. She tugged on the cuff and let it lead her on.

She walked, and then she ran, her hooves clattering against the path. She almost never got to run as fast as she actually could — mustn’t appear too inhuman in front of the mortals. For a moment, she almost forgot everything in the pleasure of motion, the low burn in her muscles and the inhale-exhale of air in her lungs. The air was magic, and she could feel herself changing, just slightly.



Then she felt a tug at her wrist, and she stopped, gasping. Right in front of her, the path trailed down into a scattering of silver stones. One more step, and she'd be off the path entirely, which put her afoul of Rule Number One. But either there was a path where she was going, or there wasn't.

Marks backtracked a little way down the path. She stripped to the waist and bent into a starter's crouch, digging her hooves into the path, her fingers brushing against the cool stone. She closed her eyes, breathed, and pushed off. She ran, and then she ran, and then, just as she ran out of path, she leaped. The wind caught her, ruffling her fur. She spread her arms, and a membrane stretched out between her arms and her body. Her fingers stretched, longer and longer, and then snapped taut into wings. She glided above the ground, twisting and dipping in the air.

*Gytha*, she thought. *Can't forget*. It was too easy to get sidetracked when just breathing felt this good. She yanked her wrist, and swooped onward, following the chain.

• • •

She slammed into the cabinet, her breath huffing out of her chest. She would feel it tomorrow, she knew. There would be knob-shaped bruises down her side.

She really shouldn't have talked back to him, not when he was in that kind of mood.

• • •

Something shrieked. Before she could react, it slammed into her, knocking her breath away. She tumbled toward the ground.

Marks twisted and slammed her horns into whatever it was that had attacked her. Then she kicked against it with all her might, propelling herself upward, gasping. It was a bird-thing, taller than her and with a humanoid face. Its eyes were blank white. It smiled at her, and she could see two rows of flat, even, white teeth.

They were flying over a forest now. Marks folded her wings and dropped toward the trees, wind whistling in her ears. The thing wheeled and dove after her, screeching, its teeth bared.

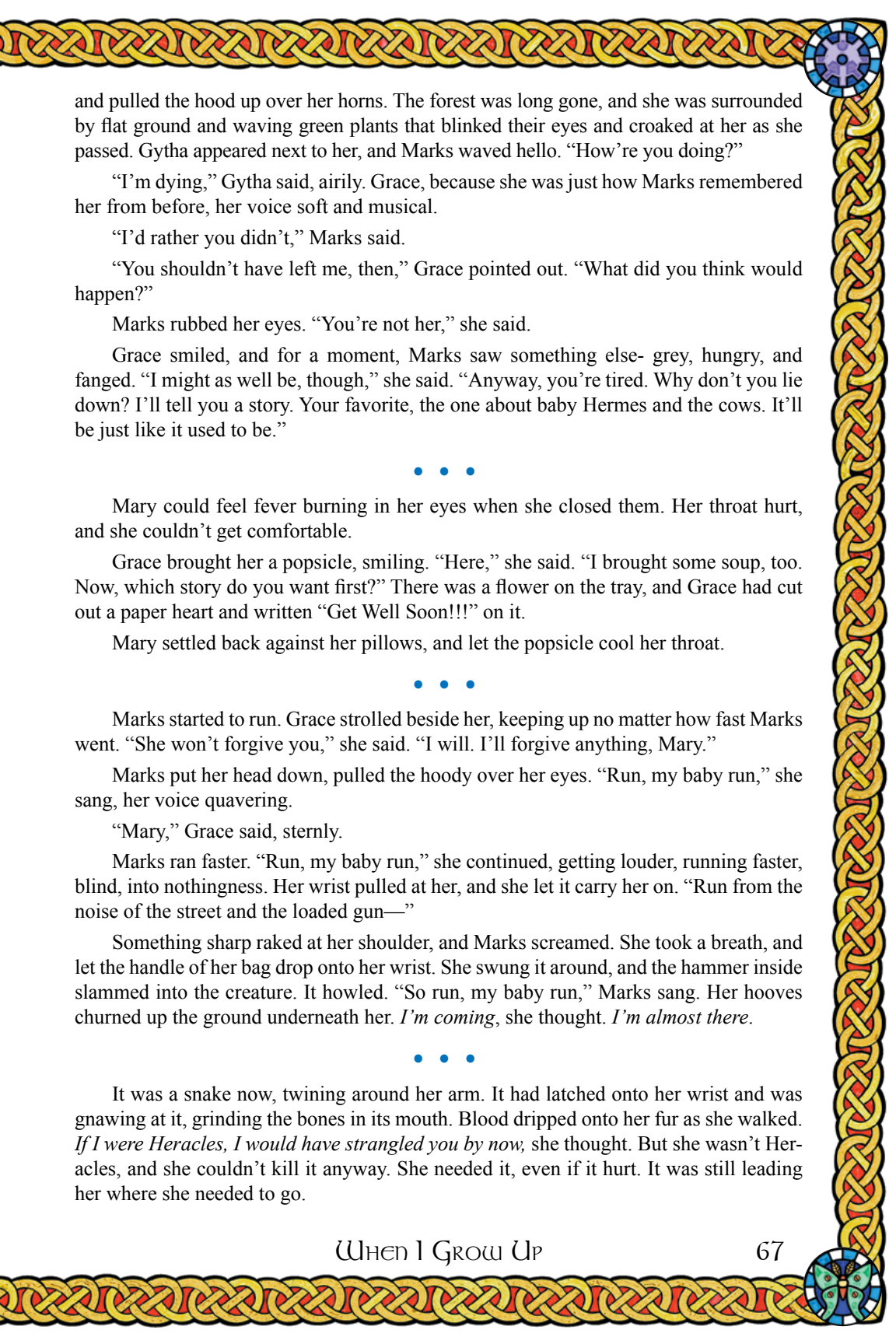
Marks twisted so that she was falling hooves-down. She closed her eyes. At the moment that she hit the ground, she pushed off again, shouting, reaching for the Glamour around her. She opened her eyes long enough to see the winged thing's claws coming at her before she shot into the air, everything blurring into streaks of lightning as she twisted into the sky.

She fell, laughing, back to earth a few minutes and an unknown number of miles later. She lay unmoving on the ground for a moment before she could get her breath back and her giggles under control. Everything came so easy here, and it felt so good.

Her wrist tugged at her. She had better continue on foot. The sky wasn't friendly here.

• • •

After a while, it wasn't a wrist cuff. It was the black hoody *Gytha* had given her for her 14th birthday. The sleeve stretched off into the distance. Marks shivered against the cold



and pulled the hood up over her horns. The forest was long gone, and she was surrounded by flat ground and waving green plants that blinked their eyes and croaked at her as she passed. Gytha appeared next to her, and Marks waved hello. “How’re you doing?”

“I’m dying,” Gytha said, airily. Grace, because she was just how Marks remembered her from before, her voice soft and musical.

“I’d rather you didn’t,” Marks said.

“You shouldn’t have left me, then,” Grace pointed out. “What did you think would happen?”

Marks rubbed her eyes. “You’re not her,” she said.

Grace smiled, and for a moment, Marks saw something else- grey, hungry, and fanged. “I might as well be, though,” she said. “Anyway, you’re tired. Why don’t you lie down? I’ll tell you a story. Your favorite, the one about baby Hermes and the cows. It’ll be just like it used to be.”

• • •

Mary could feel fever burning in her eyes when she closed them. Her throat hurt, and she couldn’t get comfortable.

Grace brought her a popsicle, smiling. “Here,” she said. “I brought some soup, too. Now, which story do you want first?” There was a flower on the tray, and Grace had cut out a paper heart and written “Get Well Soon!!!” on it.

Mary settled back against her pillows, and let the popsicle cool her throat.

• • •

Marks started to run. Grace strolled beside her, keeping up no matter how fast Marks went. “She won’t forgive you,” she said. “I will. I’ll forgive anything, Mary.”

Marks put her head down, pulled the hood over her eyes. “Run, my baby run,” she sang, her voice quavering.

“Mary,” Grace said, sternly.

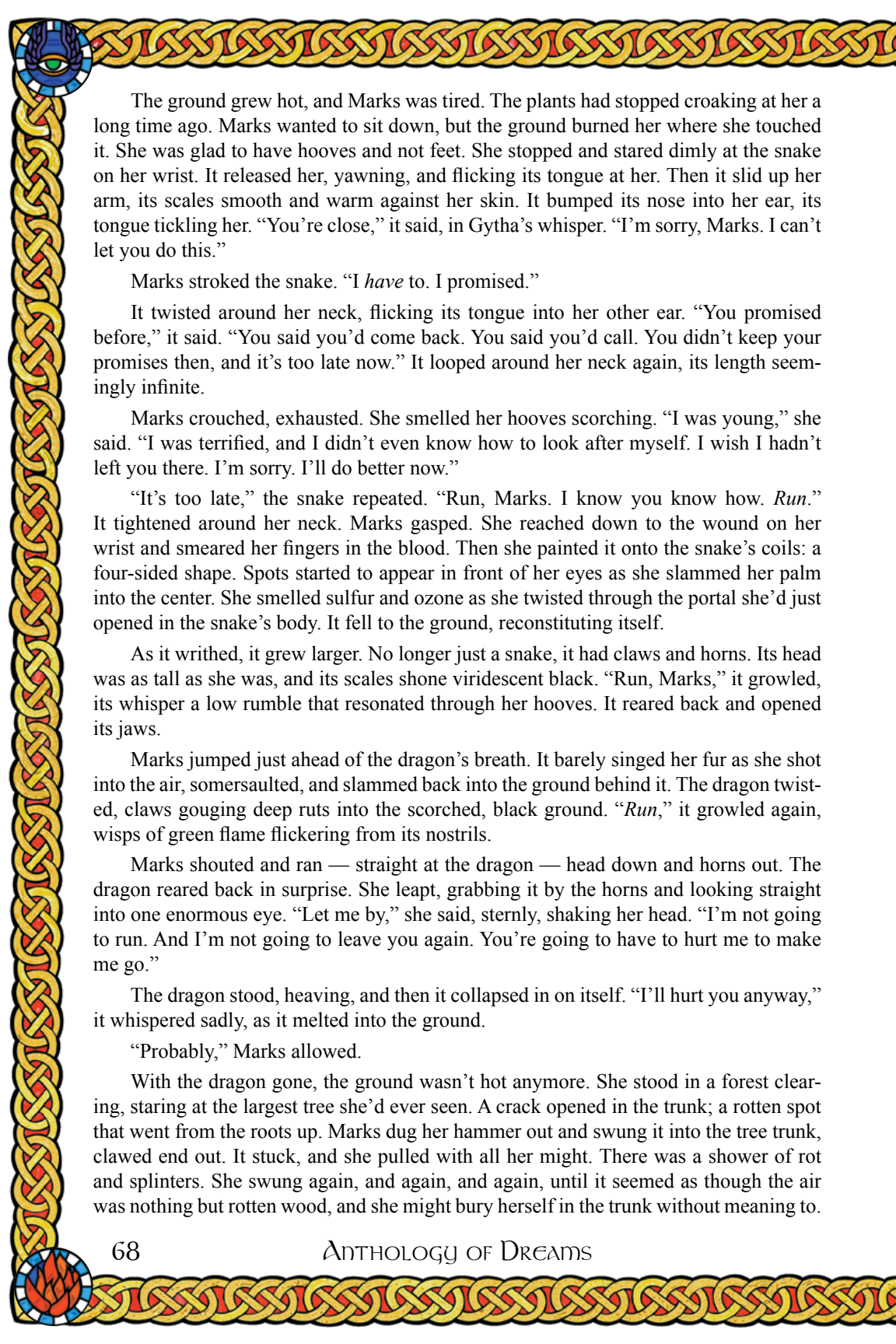
Marks ran faster. “Run, my baby run,” she continued, getting louder, running faster, blind, into nothingness. Her wrist pulled at her, and she let it carry her on. “Run from the noise of the street and the loaded gun—”

Something sharp raked at her shoulder, and Marks screamed. She took a breath, and let the handle of her bag drop onto her wrist. She swung it around, and the hammer inside slammed into the creature. It howled. “So run, my baby run,” Marks sang. Her hooves churned up the ground underneath her. *I’m coming*, she thought. *I’m almost there*.

• • •

It was a snake now, twining around her arm. It had latched onto her wrist and was gnawing at it, grinding the bones in its mouth. Blood dripped onto her fur as she walked. *If I were Heracles, I would have strangled you by now*, she thought. But she wasn’t Heracles, and she couldn’t kill it anyway. She needed it, even if it hurt. It was still leading her where she needed to go.





The ground grew hot, and Marks was tired. The plants had stopped croaking at her a long time ago. Marks wanted to sit down, but the ground burned her where she touched it. She was glad to have hooves and not feet. She stopped and stared dimly at the snake on her wrist. It released her, yawning, and flicking its tongue at her. Then it slid up her arm, its scales smooth and warm against her skin. It bumped its nose into her ear, its tongue tickling her. "You're close," it said, in Gytha's whisper. "I'm sorry, Marks. I can't let you do this."

Marks stroked the snake. "I *have* to. I promised."

It twisted around her neck, flicking its tongue into her other ear. "You promised before," it said. "You said you'd come back. You said you'd call. You didn't keep your promises then, and it's too late now." It looped around her neck again, its length seemingly infinite.

Marks crouched, exhausted. She smelled her hooves scorching. "I was young," she said. "I was terrified, and I didn't even know how to look after myself. I wish I hadn't left you there. I'm sorry. I'll do better now."

"It's too late," the snake repeated. "Run, Marks. I know you know how. *Run*." It tightened around her neck. Marks gasped. She reached down to the wound on her wrist and smeared her fingers in the blood. Then she painted it onto the snake's coils: a four-sided shape. Spots started to appear in front of her eyes as she slammed her palm into the center. She smelled sulfur and ozone as she twisted through the portal she'd just opened in the snake's body. It fell to the ground, reconstituting itself.

As it writhed, it grew larger. No longer just a snake, it had claws and horns. Its head was as tall as she was, and its scales shone viridescent black. "Run, Marks," it growled, its whisper a low rumble that resonated through her hooves. It reared back and opened its jaws.

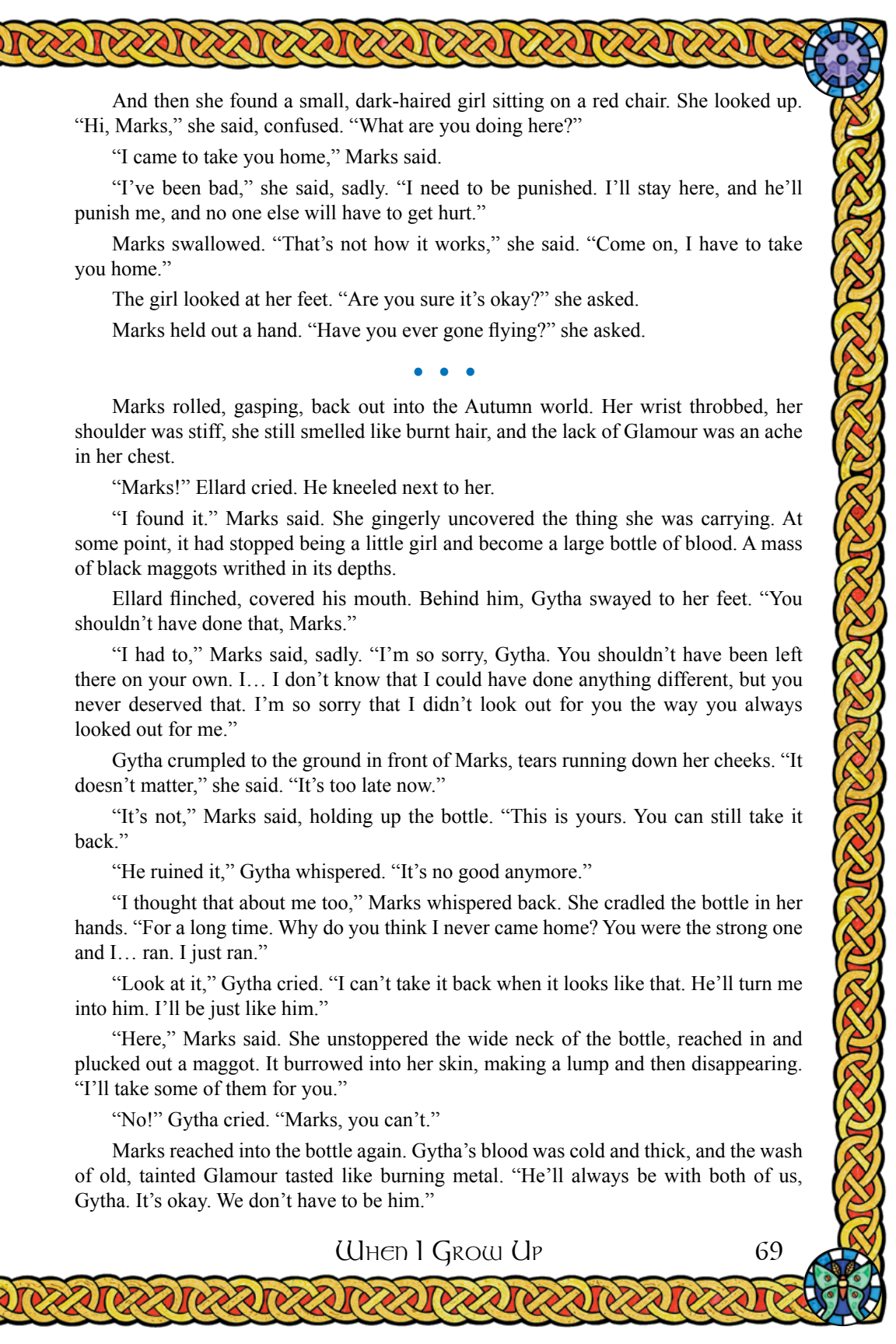
Marks jumped just ahead of the dragon's breath. It barely singed her fur as she shot into the air, somersaulted, and slammed back into the ground behind it. The dragon twisted, claws gouging deep ruts into the scorched, black ground. "*Run*," it growled again, wisps of green flame flickering from its nostrils.

Marks shouted and ran — straight at the dragon — head down and horns out. The dragon reared back in surprise. She leapt, grabbing it by the horns and looking straight into one enormous eye. "Let me by," she said, sternly, shaking her head. "I'm not going to run. And I'm not going to leave you again. You're going to have to hurt me to make me go."

The dragon stood, heaving, and then it collapsed in on itself. "I'll hurt you anyway," it whispered sadly, as it melted into the ground.

"Probably," Marks allowed.

With the dragon gone, the ground wasn't hot anymore. She stood in a forest clearing, staring at the largest tree she'd ever seen. A crack opened in the trunk; a rotten spot that went from the roots up. Marks dug her hammer out and swung it into the tree trunk, clawed end out. It stuck, and she pulled with all her might. There was a shower of rot and splinters. She swung again, and again, and again, until it seemed as though the air was nothing but rotten wood, and she might bury herself in the trunk without meaning to.



And then she found a small, dark-haired girl sitting on a red chair. She looked up. "Hi, Marks," she said, confused. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to take you home," Marks said.

"I've been bad," she said, sadly. "I need to be punished. I'll stay here, and he'll punish me, and no one else will have to get hurt."

Marks swallowed. "That's not how it works," she said. "Come on, I have to take you home."

The girl looked at her feet. "Are you sure it's okay?" she asked.

Marks held out a hand. "Have you ever gone flying?" she asked.

• • •

Marks rolled, gasping, back out into the Autumn world. Her wrist throbbed, her shoulder was stiff, she still smelled like burnt hair, and the lack of Glamour was an ache in her chest.

"Marks!" Ellard cried. He kneeled next to her.

"I found it," Marks said. She gingerly uncovered the thing she was carrying. At some point, it had stopped being a little girl and become a large bottle of blood. A mass of black maggots writhed in its depths.

Ellard flinched, covered his mouth. Behind him, Gytha swayed to her feet. "You shouldn't have done that, Marks."

"I had to," Marks said, sadly. "I'm so sorry, Gytha. You shouldn't have been left there on your own. I... I don't know that I could have done anything different, but you never deserved that. I'm so sorry that I didn't look out for you the way you always looked out for me."

Gytha crumpled to the ground in front of Marks, tears running down her cheeks. "It doesn't matter," she said. "It's too late now."

"It's not," Marks said, holding up the bottle. "This is yours. You can still take it back."

"He ruined it," Gytha whispered. "It's no good anymore."

"I thought that about me too," Marks whispered back. She cradled the bottle in her hands. "For a long time. Why do you think I never came home? You were the strong one and I... ran. I just ran."

"Look at it," Gytha cried. "I can't take it back when it looks like that. He'll turn me into him. I'll be just like him."

"Here," Marks said. She unstopped the wide neck of the bottle, reached in and plucked out a maggot. It burrowed into her skin, making a lump and then disappearing. "I'll take some of them for you."

"No!" Gytha cried. "Marks, you can't."

Marks reached into the bottle again. Gytha's blood was cold and thick, and the wash of old, tainted Glamour tasted like burning metal. "He'll always be with both of us, Gytha. It's okay. We don't have to be him."

Gytha touched her lightly on the arm. Marks shoved her hand deeper into the bottle, let another maggot burrow into her. "Are you sure it's okay?" Gytha asked.

Marks nodded. "I'll stay with you until it's over," she promised.

Gytha unbuttoned the high collar of her shirt. There was a ragged, oozing gash running from one side of her neck to the other. "Help me?" she asked.

Marks pulled her hand out of the bottle. The blood coated her fingers, but didn't drip.

Gytha tilted her head back, and her neck gaped open. Marks lifted the bottle, poured it in. The gash closed.

"It burns," Gytha said, crying. "It hurts." But her cheeks already looked less hollowed, and her arms less skeletal.

Marks reached an arm around her. Ellard reached for Marks' other hand. "It's gonna hurt for a long time," he said, softly. "And it'll leave a hell of a scar."







# WATERCOLORS

*By Deborah J. Brannon*

The first time he met Aela, he stole her sealskin jacket while she bought them ice cream cones from the boardwalk vendor. He hadn't told her his favorite flavor, but she came back beaming and handed him a cone with two scoops of Rocky Road anyway. He didn't even feel a twinge of guilt at the jacket crumpled in his messenger bag, but hooked his arm around her as they wandered along the beach toward the carnival.

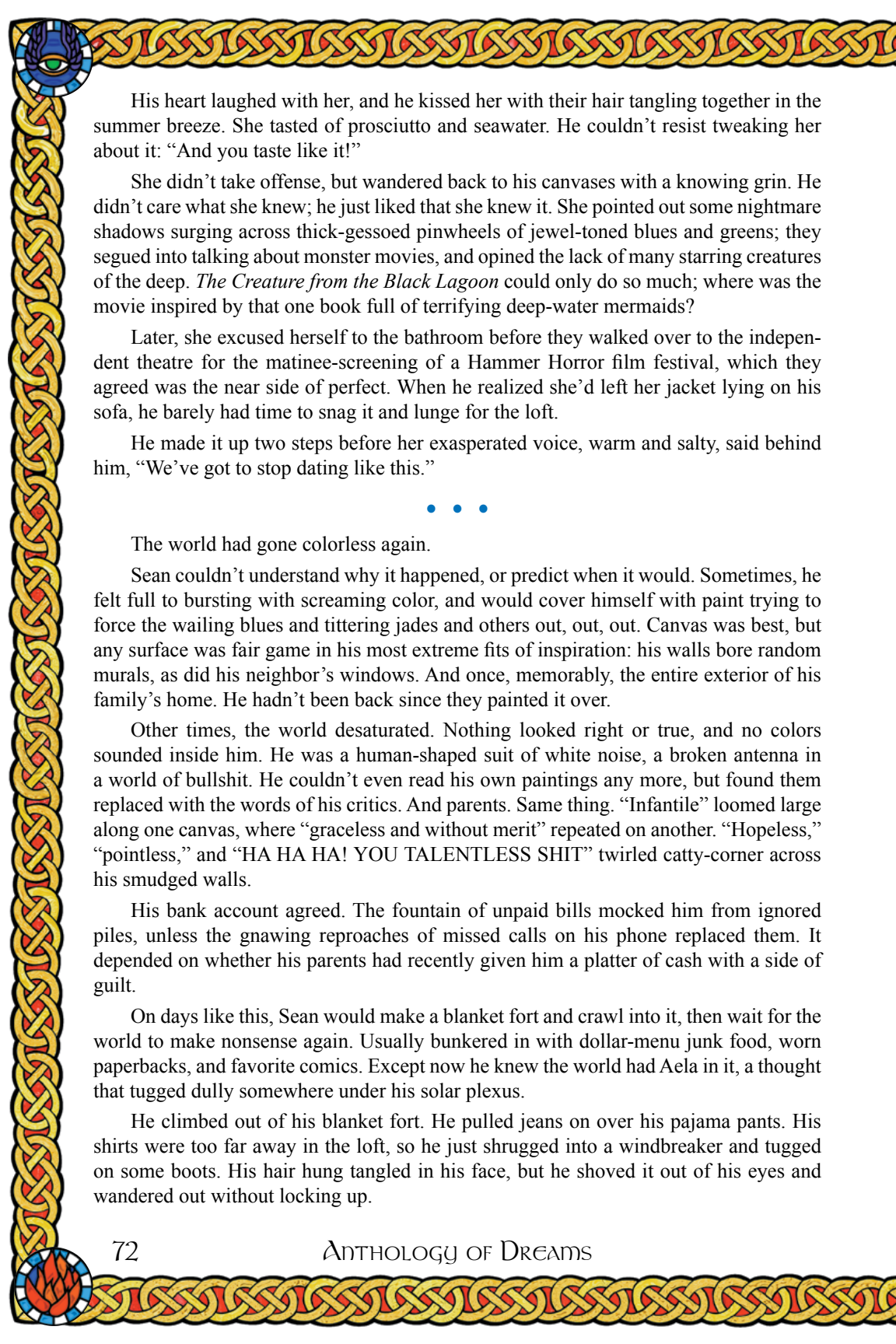
It was eight hours into their first date, and Sean knew three things: her hair was the color of sun-flecked silt, he never wanted to say goodbye, and she was a selkie.

She didn't miss her skin for the rest of the night, but she hooked it easily out of the disused trashcan of his studio the next morning, as if she'd known where it was the whole time. He'd hidden it so carefully, but she was gone with the dawn.

He wasn't awake to say goodbye.

• • •

A few days later, Aela turned up on his doorstep with fresh-pressed panini and salt-tossed hair. They ate them in his summer-lit studio, with the cries of gulls spiraling in through the open windows. She didn't say anything about the tear tracks on his face, and he was hard-pressed to remember why or how they were there. Aela seemed to bring warmth back into the world, and colors that had all morning seemed cold and remote surged back into vital immediacy. She felt like him painting. So, he dared show her his work, some canvases splashed with raging green and sullen black, slashed by brilliant arcs of white and violet; others inchoate, but organic shapes of carmine and coral. They stymied the public — his shows had never been well reviewed — but she just laughed. “You’ve captured all the faces of the sea!”



His heart laughed with her, and he kissed her with their hair tangling together in the summer breeze. She tasted of prosciutto and seawater. He couldn't resist tweaking her about it: "And you taste like it!"

She didn't take offense, but wandered back to his canvases with a knowing grin. He didn't care what she knew; he just liked that she knew it. She pointed out some nightmare shadows surging across thick-gessoed pinwheels of jewel-toned blues and greens; they segued into talking about monster movies, and opined the lack of many starring creatures of the deep. *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* could only do so much; where was the movie inspired by that one book full of terrifying deep-water mermaids?

Later, she excused herself to the bathroom before they walked over to the independent theatre for the matinee-screening of a Hammer Horror film festival, which they agreed was the near side of perfect. When he realized she'd left her jacket lying on his sofa, he barely had time to snag it and lunge for the loft.

He made it up two steps before her exasperated voice, warm and salty, said behind him, "We've got to stop dating like this."

• • •

The world had gone colorless again.


Sean couldn't understand why it happened, or predict when it would. Sometimes, he felt full to bursting with screaming color, and would cover himself with paint trying to force the wailing blues and tittering jades and others out, out, out. Canvas was best, but any surface was fair game in his most extreme fits of inspiration: his walls bore random murals, as did his neighbor's windows. And once, memorably, the entire exterior of his family's home. He hadn't been back since they painted it over.

Other times, the world desaturated. Nothing looked right or true, and no colors sounded inside him. He was a human-shaped suit of white noise, a broken antenna in a world of bullshit. He couldn't even read his own paintings any more, but found them replaced with the words of his critics. And parents. Same thing. "Infantile" loomed large along one canvas, where "graceless and without merit" repeated on another. "Hopeless," "pointless," and "HA HA HA! YOU TALENTLESS SHIT" twirled catty-corner across his smudged walls.

His bank account agreed. The fountain of unpaid bills mocked him from ignored piles, unless the gnawing reproaches of missed calls on his phone replaced them. It depended on whether his parents had recently given him a platter of cash with a side of guilt.

On days like this, Sean would make a blanket fort and crawl into it, then wait for the world to make nonsense again. Usually bunkered in with dollar-menu junk food, worn paperbacks, and favorite comics. Except now he knew the world had Aela in it, a thought that tugged dully somewhere under his solar plexus.

He climbed out of his blanket fort. He pulled jeans on over his pajama pants. His shirts were too far away in the loft, so he just shrugged into a windbreaker and tugged on some boots. His hair hung tangled in his face, but he shoved it out of his eyes and wandered out without locking up.



The ocean drew him, as it always did: two blocks to the right, and straight on till Morning Street. But Aela was not there. There were only late summer tourists and indifferent locals. He considered lying down in the sand, so the tide would wash him away as well. He wondered how long it would take.

He was staring emptily at the seafoam when a dazzlement pierced his right eye. He jerked around like a marionette, loose-limbed, and with a clattering shout. Beach joggers gave him a wide berth; seagulls scolded him from the air.

Sean didn't notice. In front of him, if a mile off, stood the pier, with the seasonal carnival set up just inland. Where all else was dull, it glittered. Colors without names wheeled scintillating in a diamond haze about the rides and peaked tents; sea spray of flung topaz susurrated about the pier's knees, and the pier itself had gone diaphanous, like a mist of plaited gold or a song vibrating slowly enough to walk on.

He was among the tents now, drunk on sight and sound and no real memory of getting there. Had he run? His heart pounded an oceanic torrent through his veins. He laughed without reason, twirled a bow to the shadow of a tall bipedal rabbit thrown against one tent wall, before careening onward into a cacophony of spun sugar, patterned light, and hawking cries that could have been "come buy!" or "come ride!"

He didn't know how long he wandered, before the scent of the turning tide enveloped him. He turned eagerly at the hand on his arm, only to find a selkie he didn't know. Her sealskin hung tied at her waist. She gave him a lopsided smile, and he furrowed his brow at her.

"You must be Sean."

"Except when I'm not." She lifted her brows, and he rocked back on his heels. "It happens, sometimes."

"To the best of us," she agreed. "I'm Aoife; you tried to steal my sister's skin."

Sean thought he'd have the good grace to blush, but it turned out he was wrong. Aoife shook her head at him, and beckoned him on. "C'mon."

They pushed into a tent glowing like a pomegranate in the darkening air. If Sean had hoped to find more selkies, he instead found stranger sights and a distant disappointment. A tall woman sat at a small table draped in black silk. Her skin shone a shade darker than the silk, where it didn't crawl with piercing scales of emerald, gold, carmine, fuchsia, azure, and dozens of flashing eyes. Snakes twined about every inch of her exposed arms, collarbones, and legs, disappearing into her hairline and above her hem. A luxurious profusion of dreadlocks was caught up in sinuous gold combs. Her wide mouth smiled; her oil-slick eyes glowed.

"I've brought you custom, my Lady Medusa." Aoife proclaimed quite prettily, with a wink and a kiss on the lady's cheek.

"Sean, I'd fancy. Sit, boy, and have your future told."

Sean did mostly as he was bid. He swung the one other chair at the table around, straddling it and staring around with frank curiosity. The tent seemed bigger on the inside, but he couldn't see much farther than a couple of feet around where they sat. Aoife had melted away, though he still felt her near. Looking up for the canvas ceiling which seemed not to exist, he commented, "I like your hair."



"Thank you. I like yours, though it's the first ombre I've seen on a guy around here."

"Most people don't get my fashion."

"Expensive jeans without a shirt, Uggs in summer, windbreaker on a windless night, unbrushed midnight hair shading toward Caribbean waters? I can see how that might not fit in."

He shrugged expansively. "Do I get to play with Tarot cards now?"

"Oh, no. No. That's not how this works." She leaned in, and he found himself mirroring her. They stared eye to eye, and her pupils went queer. Neither of them blinked. "You are going to tell me a story."

"Right. Sure." He cleared his throat. "Here's the story of a lovely lady, who was bringing up three very..."

"Start again."

"Uh. The first time I met Aela, I stole her sealskin jacket. We were eight hours into our first date, and..."

"Too meta. Try again."

Sean bared his teeth and flexed his hands on the chairback; something not unlike allspice tickled his nose. The woman's tattoos were moving, or he thought they were until he looked at them. Even then a tracery of gold danced at the periphery of his vision. Letting his eyes unfocus, Sean began, "Once upon a time, I walked a golden road into a depthless sea where titanic and primal forms spilled black water among schools of dreams..."

He could never remember the story he told in that impossible tent; the words he spoke misted into nothingness as soon as he spoke them. But the woman seemed unfathomably satisfied. Once he found his way back home that night, he felt that way too. He scarcely realized that, if she told his future, she certainly didn't tell it to him.

He slept, and dreamed, and woke quoting an old favorite film. "What's a pooka?" he mumbled to a once more colorful and contradictory world.

• • •

Aela came and went like the tide, as mysterious an occurrence as his changing worldviews. He couldn't call them moods; they were so much more fundamental than that. He also couldn't call them depression or anxiety, for all that his parents and doctors did. But therapy, in his case, seemed to have no appreciable effect and the various prescriptions they tried flat-out didn't work. He understood their efficacy for friends of his who lived with variable brain chemistry; it seemed only his brain that stood apart in stubborn indifference. The oddity made him feel inhuman.

For all her vibrancy, especially in the colorless world, Aela couldn't always flip his worldview. She was no MPDG, though she sometimes joked he was her Manic Pixie Dream Guy. Usually after he talked her into saran-wrapping sleeping neighbors' doors or as they ran laughing from tagging some boring office building's front wall. But on his colorless days, she'd crawl into his blanket fort with him and trade favorite stories. And when he noticed she looked especially dampened, she'd tell him it wasn't his fault. He never believed that bit. Her absences were always longer after those days, and her answer why always the same.



“Just had to find a little glamor, that’s all.”

• • •

On their seventh date, Aela handed him her sealskin jacket with a laugh at his wide eyes. Sean held it a bit helplessly, the pelt the same slate grey of her eyes dangling from his wind-chapped fingers. Things had been feeling a bit white at the edges that day. He’d been sketching at a secluded beach, found only by locals; supposedly, he was striving for a more realistic style with landscape practice. Honestly, he’d been watching the waves and hoping Aela would walk out of them.

The only other selkie he knew stood dripping at Aela’s side, stripping off her own jacket. The pelt was tawny, driftwood rather than stone, and she threw it over Aela’s shoulders. She turned to Sean with a smirk, and he realized they had the same eyes. “Neither one’s for stealing!” Then she was gone, loping across the dunes like a woman with a lover waiting.

“Aoife,” she said, by way of explanation, “is off to explore the carnival without fear of punkish artists stealing her skin.” Aela winked at him, and Sean managed a blush this time.

“Did you say Puckish?”

“Maybe.”


“Because, I will have you know, I am not a punk. My musical tastes are not that cool. I do love Shakespeare’s trickster, though...” Aela laughed again, sweeter than the crashing tide. “So, I’ve met your sister. Where’s the rest—”

“—of my motley family? Around.” She offered her hand, and Sean rubbed his fingers against the webbing between hers. “Shall we catch the tide?” He thought of his art supplies scattered on the beach behind him, of his cell phone tucked into his sneakers. He realized he couldn’t care less about them. Aela’s scent of brine and sweet things in the dark enfolded him as he shrugged into the supple jacket. Once he pulled it close, a curious feeling crashed through his blood, and the song of the ocean exploded into his consciousness, dancing from neuron to neuron. He could see the world with eyes closed. Aela pulled him into the sea.

Life as a seal felt, at first, as if he swam through his paintings: greens and blues fought for dominance beneath the waves, but he quickly found himself distracted by the vibrations in his whiskers. They slid through silken water, hunting fish and squid, and spent all night rolling against each other or playing in the surf. Yet for all the magic singing along his borrowed skin, for all that the world felt so much more right, something still separated him from a deeper truth he suspected lurked inside his blood and bone.

It was dawn before he found himself fetched up on the shore, flank to flank with Aela, once more human. He knew three things as the sun lit up her brine-streaked skin: that he was in love with her, that all inspiration came from the sea, and that this was not how stories about selkies went.

He rolled towards her as she did the same, and they spent some time kissing in the spray. She drew back, and his desire for Aela sang louder than the sea mystery in his blood. He knew only the shape of the dry land’s stories, and so he whispered, “Aela, come home with me. Let me hide your skin so well you’ll never find it.”



She climbed to her feet. Sean scrambled to his own. His words fell faster from his lips, more desperate now. "Let me close your eyes with laughter! Stay forever. Please." Aoife was wandering down toward them, the carnival fortuneteller wrapped around her, and his moment was slipping away. Aela stopped his tongue with a glance.

"Fuck that. I'm not the abducting type." And then she and Aoife were gone.

• • •

He didn't see Aela for weeks. He went to their little beach every day at first, staring into the ceaseless flow of the Pacific. No seals broke the water, but he made friends with several seagulls who only wanted him for his lunches. No loyalty in those birds, and they stole his charcoal when he wasn't looking.

He knew he'd done something terribly wrong, and wished he could unask his traitorous question. Yet just as much as he longed to see Aela, he longed to swim once more beneath the sea. The colorless world was farther then, for all the ocean's lightless depths. He considered asking his parents for SCUBA lessons; they probably had an instructor on call at their yacht club. Still, he wasn't sure the emotional math of the request would work out in his favor.

Just before dawn a fortnight later, Aoife's serpentine girlfriend turned up on Sean's doorstep. He invited her in, and handed her a cup of coffee with a wry, "I'm sorry, but I only know you as Lady Medusa."

Her return smile was frank and amused. "It's a good enough name, but you can call me Lakeisha." She saw him admiring the green mamba wrapped around her bicep, and flexed so its coils moved. He clapped his hands together, and she laughed. "You're easily amused."

"Of that, I am so, so guilty. Speaking of guilt, are you guilty of stalking? I don't remember sharing my address."


"I'm good at turning up at the right place at the right time, no stalking required." She set aside her coffee. "I'm meeting Aoife at dawn, and thought you might like to come along."

Sean's pulse quickened, and they left for the shore immediately - then stepped back into his apartment when Lakeisha insisted he put on some shoes. A brisk walk in the new light of day brought them in sight of the beach and a lone waiting figure. Lakeisha handed Aoife a dress, and Aoife handed Sean her skin. He just barely managed not to snatch, gabbling out his thanks as he ran into the waves.

He felt sure he could find Aela, that the sea would guide him true. Only, first he had to get used to this new sealskin. He spent a while chasing his own hind flippers, twisting and tumbling through the water in sheer joy. He reveled in the grasp of currents, their touch much firmer than the air's, and then he found himself hungry, so played a stalking game with a squid that ended in a very satisfying snack. Afterward, he surfaced on some farther beach and found a group of harbor seals sunning themselves; he barked a greeting and went to see how the seal half lived. It was quite nice, basking on the warm sands, just one among a blubbery herd.

It got boring after a while, but the whole of the sea lay open to him. He splashed back into the waves, intent on diving deep. His nostrils sealed themselves, and his pupils





dilated to make use of every scrap of light. He pushed on, scattering marine life before him and leaving the surface behind. Pressure mounted, and his whiskers vibrated independently of each other. Sean became aware of a split inside him.

It brought him up short, and he floated in gloom the color of sorrow. He pressed into the ocean like a man pressed at a window, if that window could flow to conform about him as he traveled into the world beyond. He knew he touched magic, was cradled by it, and allowed in this new world, but it wasn't inside him. It was borrowed, and he was blue. His flippers drifted together, blunt claws straining toward a hidden seam, as if he meant to shrug off a jacket.

A dazzlement pierced his left eye, and his pupils thinned in sudden light. He slewed upside down, easily tracking the illumination to its source - and saw the damndest thing. A goat swam toward him through the water, hind legs churning before it with a sinuous fish's tail undulating behind. Its cerulean scales gleamed, leaving a trail of light glittering in its wake. Flukes flashed to stabilize it face-to-face with Sean, and square-pupiled eyes appraised him.

Sean blinked at the Capricorn. The Capricorn opened his mouth to bleat, then closed it on a blep. After a moment's regard, tongue still poking out, it turned and swam away. Sean followed.

The part of Sean that understood his sealness knew he needed to surface soon, and he was thankful to realize the Capricorn was ascending as they went. The water was growing brighter as well, though Sean quickly realized it had nothing to do with the sun. The very water around him was glowing, and the creatures swimming through the sea were becoming impossible to describe. He felt like he was swimming through the most fantastical map labeled "here be dragons."

In the center of all this strangeness stood a great rock, rearing from the depths, and thrusting up through the surface above. Sean left his Capricorn guide behind, breaking the water in a tremendous side-flopping leap. The rock towered higher than his seal-self could scale, so he stripped it off, tying Aoife's jacket securely around his waist as he tread water. Then he felt for nooks and crannies, clambering up the sheer face until he heaved himself onto stone painted umber by the westering sun. Aela stood above him. She reached down, and his hand found hers.

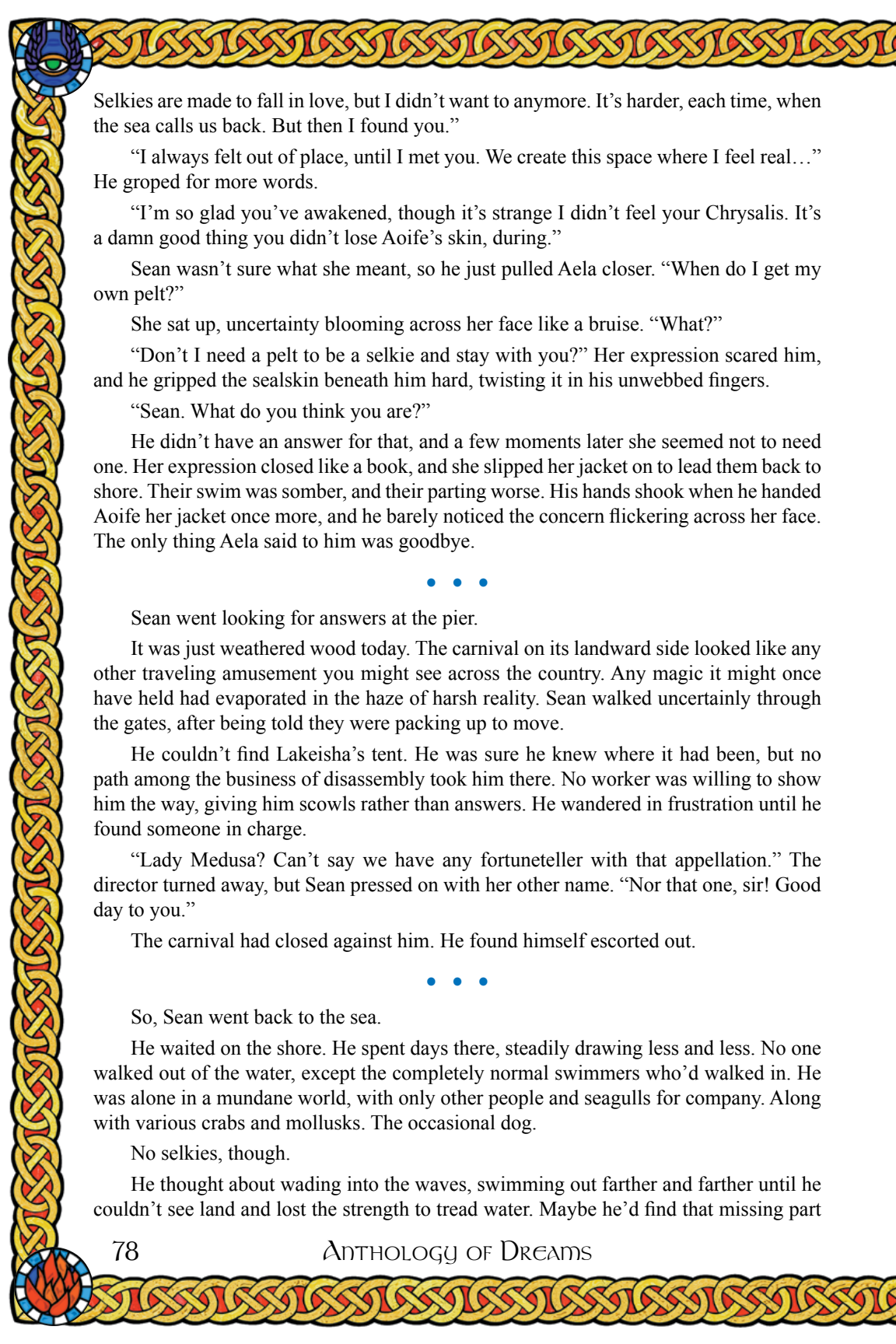


"I'm sorry I asked you to run away into narrative stereotypes with me." Sean couldn't see anything but the turquoise blue tips of his hair, where he stood bent in a heartfelt yet ridiculous bow before his selkie girlfriend.

She leaned over and swept his hair back, smiling into his eyes. "That's a very fine apology, Sean. I think I'll accept it." And then she pushed him off the rock.

They were both laughing by the time he clambered back up again, and laid out their sealskins to watch the sun sink below the horizon. He described his day to her and what he'd seen, and she put names to those things he didn't know. They stopped talking for a while, lost in each other, and neither of them noticed as the moon rose over the water.

The moon was quite high indeed when Aela sighed into his shoulder, and spoke happiness tinged with unalterable grief. "I was so tired of loss, Sean, when I met you."



Selkies are made to fall in love, but I didn't want to anymore. It's harder, each time, when the sea calls us back. But then I found you."

"I always felt out of place, until I met you. We create this space where I feel real..." He groped for more words.

"I'm so glad you've awakened, though it's strange I didn't feel your Chrysalis. It's a damn good thing you didn't lose Aoife's skin, during."

Sean wasn't sure what she meant, so he just pulled Aela closer. "When do I get my own pelt?"

She sat up, uncertainty blooming across her face like a bruise. "What?"

"Don't I need a pelt to be a selkie and stay with you?" Her expression scared him, and he gripped the sealskin beneath him hard, twisting it in his unwebbed fingers.

"Sean. What do you think you are?"

He didn't have an answer for that, and a few moments later she seemed not to need one. Her expression closed like a book, and she slipped her jacket on to lead them back to shore. Their swim was somber, and their parting worse. His hands shook when he handed Aoife her jacket once more, and he barely noticed the concern flickering across her face. The only thing Aela said to him was goodbye.

• • •

Sean went looking for answers at the pier.

It was just weathered wood today. The carnival on its landward side looked like any other traveling amusement you might see across the country. Any magic it might once have held had evaporated in the haze of harsh reality. Sean walked uncertainly through the gates, after being told they were packing up to move.

He couldn't find Lakeisha's tent. He was sure he knew where it had been, but no path among the business of disassembly took him there. No worker was willing to show him the way, giving him scowls rather than answers. He wandered in frustration until he found someone in charge.

"Lady Medusa? Can't say we have any fortuneteller with that appellation." The director turned away, but Sean pressed on with her other name. "Nor that one, sir! Good day to you."

The carnival had closed against him. He found himself escorted out.

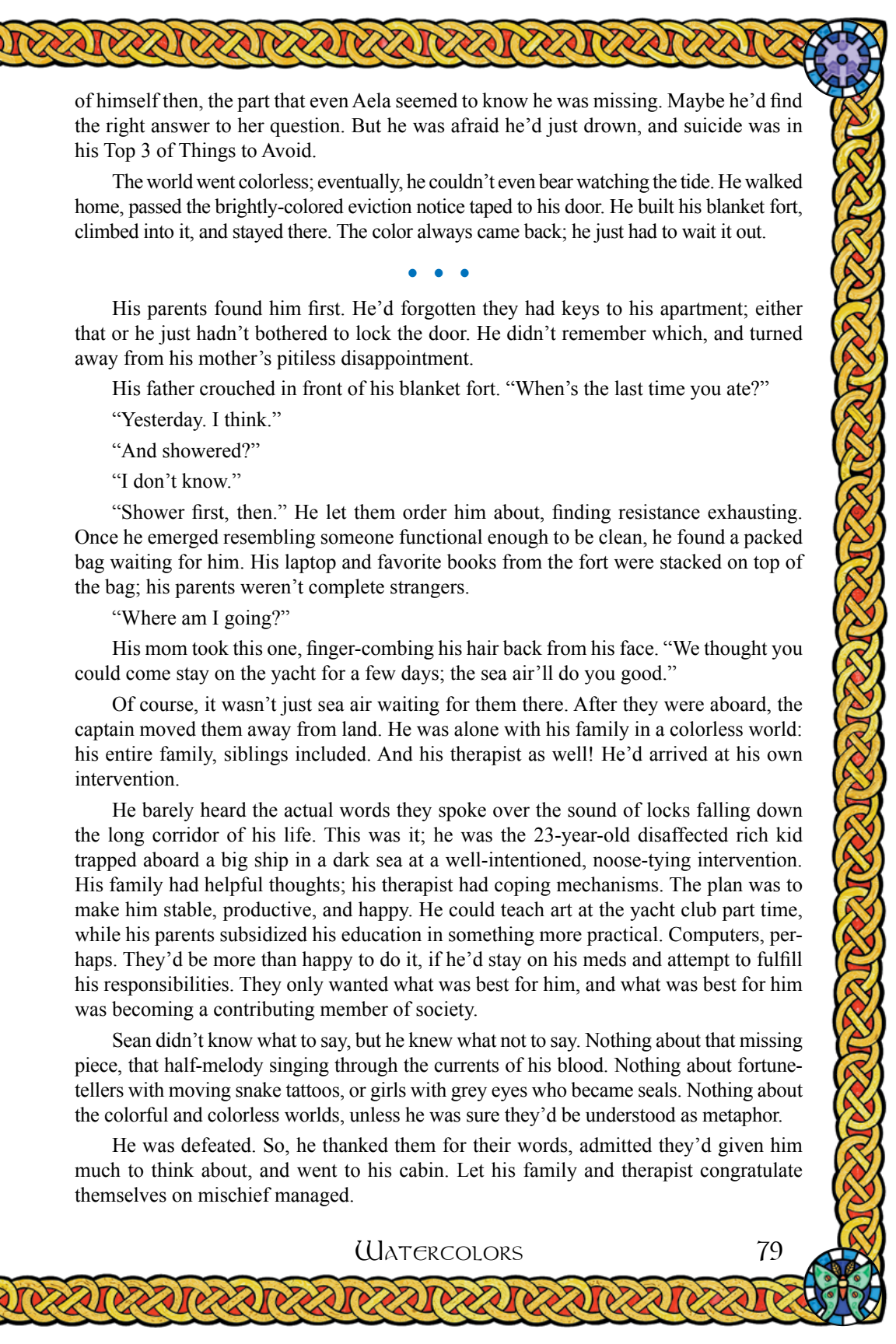
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So, Sean went back to the sea.

He waited on the shore. He spent days there, steadily drawing less and less. No one walked out of the water, except the completely normal swimmers who'd walked in. He was alone in a mundane world, with only other people and seagulls for company. Along with various crabs and mollusks. The occasional dog.

No selkies, though.

He thought about wading into the waves, swimming out farther and farther until he couldn't see land and lost the strength to tread water. Maybe he'd find that missing part



of himself then, the part that even Aela seemed to know he was missing. Maybe he'd find the right answer to her question. But he was afraid he'd just drown, and suicide was in his Top 3 of Things to Avoid.

The world went colorless; eventually, he couldn't even bear watching the tide. He walked home, passed the brightly-colored eviction notice taped to his door. He built his blanket fort, climbed into it, and stayed there. The color always came back; he just had to wait it out.

• • •

His parents found him first. He'd forgotten they had keys to his apartment; either that or he just hadn't bothered to lock the door. He didn't remember which, and turned away from his mother's pitiless disappointment.

His father crouched in front of his blanket fort. "When's the last time you ate?"

"Yesterday. I think."

"And showered?"

"I don't know."

"Shower first, then." He let them order him about, finding resistance exhausting. Once he emerged resembling someone functional enough to be clean, he found a packed bag waiting for him. His laptop and favorite books from the fort were stacked on top of the bag; his parents weren't complete strangers.

"Where am I going?"

His mom took this one, finger-combing his hair back from his face. "We thought you could come stay on the yacht for a few days; the sea air'll do you good."

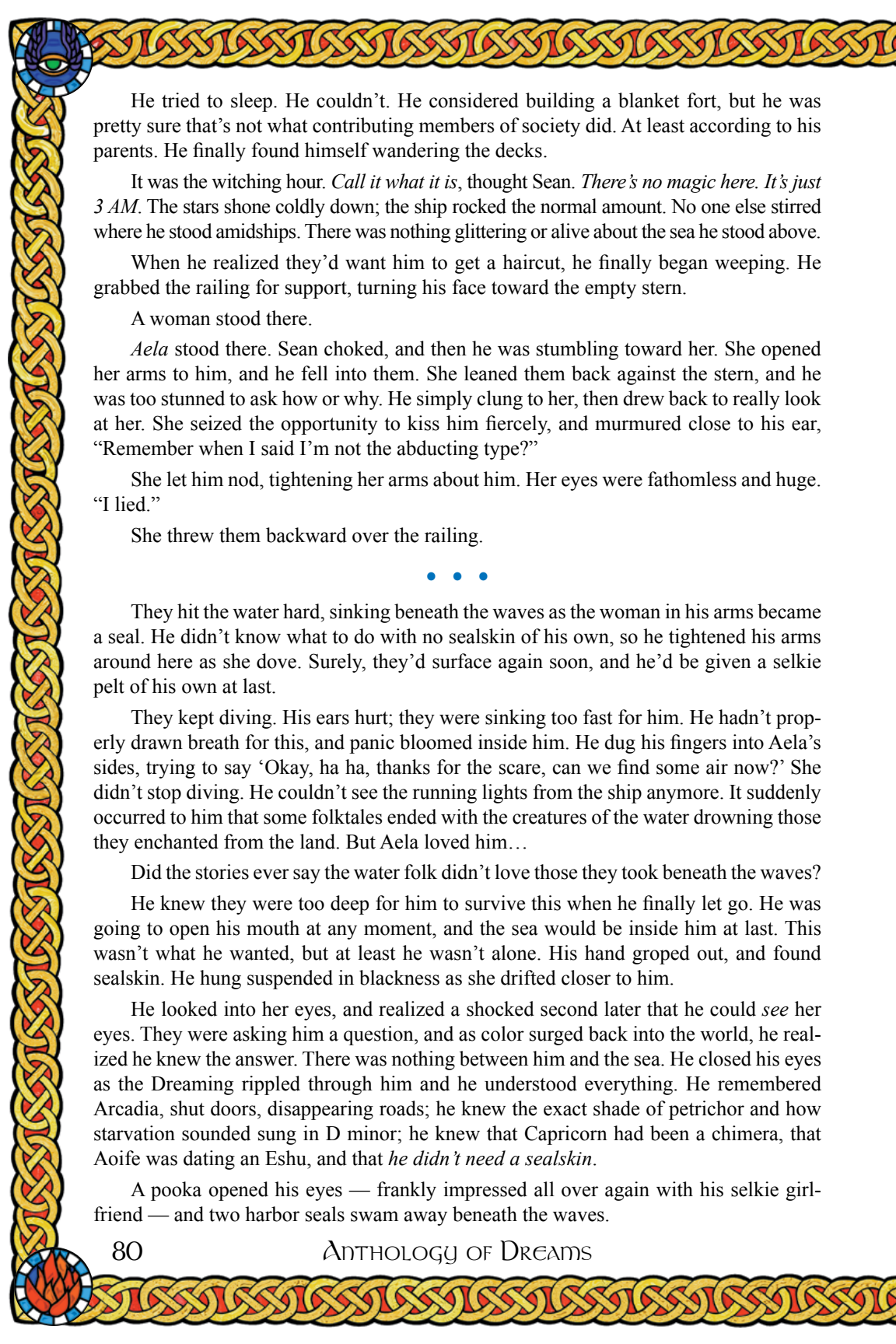
Of course, it wasn't just sea air waiting for them there. After they were aboard, the captain moved them away from land. He was alone with his family in a colorless world: his entire family, siblings included. And his therapist as well! He'd arrived at his own intervention.

He barely heard the actual words they spoke over the sound of locks falling down the long corridor of his life. This was it; he was the 23-year-old disaffected rich kid trapped aboard a big ship in a dark sea at a well-intentioned, noose-tying intervention. His family had helpful thoughts; his therapist had coping mechanisms. The plan was to make him stable, productive, and happy. He could teach art at the yacht club part time, while his parents subsidized his education in something more practical. Computers, perhaps. They'd be more than happy to do it, if he'd stay on his meds and attempt to fulfill his responsibilities. They only wanted what was best for him, and what was best for him was becoming a contributing member of society.

Sean didn't know what to say, but he knew what not to say. Nothing about that missing piece, that half-melody singing through the currents of his blood. Nothing about fortune-tellers with moving snake tattoos, or girls with grey eyes who became seals. Nothing about the colorful and colorless worlds, unless he was sure they'd be understood as metaphor.

He was defeated. So, he thanked them for their words, admitted they'd given him much to think about, and went to his cabin. Let his family and therapist congratulate themselves on mischief managed.





He tried to sleep. He couldn't. He considered building a blanket fort, but he was pretty sure that's not what contributing members of society did. At least according to his parents. He finally found himself wandering the decks.

It was the witching hour. *Call it what it is*, thought Sean. *There's no magic here. It's just 3 AM.* The stars shone coldly down; the ship rocked the normal amount. No one else stirred where he stood amidships. There was nothing glittering or alive about the sea he stood above.

When he realized they'd want him to get a haircut, he finally began weeping. He grabbed the railing for support, turning his face toward the empty stern.

A woman stood there.

Aela stood there. Sean choked, and then he was stumbling toward her. She opened her arms to him, and he fell into them. She leaned them back against the stern, and he was too stunned to ask how or why. He simply clung to her, then drew back to really look at her. She seized the opportunity to kiss him fiercely, and murmured close to his ear, "Remember when I said I'm not the abducting type?"

She let him nod, tightening her arms about him. Her eyes were fathomless and huge. "I lied."

She threw them backward over the railing.



They hit the water hard, sinking beneath the waves as the woman in his arms became a seal. He didn't know what to do with no sealskin of his own, so he tightened his arms around her as she dove. Surely, they'd surface again soon, and he'd be given a selkie pelt of his own at last.

They kept diving. His ears hurt; they were sinking too fast for him. He hadn't properly drawn breath for this, and panic bloomed inside him. He dug his fingers into Aela's sides, trying to say "Okay, ha ha, thanks for the scare, can we find some air now?" She didn't stop diving. He couldn't see the running lights from the ship anymore. It suddenly occurred to him that some folktales ended with the creatures of the water drowning those they enchanted from the land. But Aela loved him...

Did the stories ever say the water folk didn't love those they took beneath the waves?

He knew they were too deep for him to survive this when he finally let go. He was going to open his mouth at any moment, and the sea would be inside him at last. This wasn't what he wanted, but at least he wasn't alone. His hand groped out, and found sealskin. He hung suspended in blackness as she drifted closer to him.

He looked into her eyes, and realized a shocked second later that he could *see* her eyes. They were asking him a question, and as color surged back into the world, he realized he knew the answer. There was nothing between him and the sea. He closed his eyes as the Dreaming rippled through him and he understood everything. He remembered Arcadia, shut doors, disappearing roads; he knew the exact shade of petrichor and how starvation sounded sung in D minor; he knew that Capricorn had been a chimera, that Aoife was dating an Eshu, and that *he didn't need a sealskin*.

A pooka opened his eyes — frankly impressed all over again with his selkie girlfriend — and two harbor seals swam away beneath the waves.



# THE COST OF SLEEP

*By Katherine McIntyre*

With the string of murders cropping up in Philly, I would have to invest in the jumbo bag of lozenges. Every damn time another one occurred, the howl ripped from my throat like it always did, that deadening wail that made the neighbors call the cops. Curse of the bean-sidhe and all that crap. Most of the tenants had left and the super threatened to kick me out on a regular basis. Except, he would have a tough time finding someone else to live in that cockroach-infested shithole I called home.


I rubbed my hand over my throat while walking along the fragmented sidewalk and wishing the rawness would die down. On a normal month, the couple of murders in my vicinity would summon my pipes to action, but recently, the game had changed.

Bodies appeared in alleys, exsanguinated and decapitated. Of course, lack of blood pointed fingers to the vampires. Yet their head honcho swore up and down his people didn't have a hand in these public and gaudy killings. Like I believed that. Heaving a sigh, I made a detour on my walk home, feeling the familiar pull of the newly -deceased. Streetlights cast feeble rays onto the ground in this section of the city, and the rank odor of rotten food wafted through the air. Skittering sounds came from the end of the block, stopping me in my tracks.

Up ahead—that's where the latest one had died. My hand balled into a fist as I approached, keeping my steps measured and even. A car rolled by, the headlights gliding over me like liquid moonlight. As the rays rolled past me and into the alley ahead, a crash echoed.

Whoever or whatever had killed the guy hadn't left.

I heaved a sigh, my shoulders tensing on instinct. The impulse to walk the opposite way tugged at me, the strong longing for the comfort of my bed. With no end in sight to these murders, though, it'd continue to be an increasing annoyance in my life. I let out a hiss, the breath like vinegar to the shredded state of my throat, as I strode towards the alley.



The closer I got, the breeze carried the sounds of the wet smack of bones, followed by the copper stench of blood; odd, because once the authorities found the bodies they'd all been drained. *Go home, go home, go home*, marched through my brain; a desperate plea at sanity, since nothing good came from tangling in other people's business. I'd learned the hard way, hence why I lived in disgrace, slumming it in a tiny bedroom in Philly.

My fingers latched on the hewn stone corner of the building in front of the alley, and before I could talk myself out of it, I peered past.

Even in the pitch of night, the hulking form was unmistakable. At least three times the size of the average linebacker with height to match, shadows stained the Troll's blue-gray skin from the bulging muscles of the creature's gargantuan frame and blood splattered his steel-toed boots.

Blood dripped down his bright blade, but after wiping the excess off on his jeans, he tucked it into the scabbard at his side. With a fluid motion, he swiped the long tube from the ground attached to a circular black vacuum and after fiddling with a couple knobs on the side, turned it on. My fingertips pressed tight to the rough stone of the corner. Hell if that was an actual vacuum — even as the end of the tube sucked up some of the blood splatters from the ground, it — left the leaves, twigs, and debris untouched.

Exsanguination device, check.

In a couple of deft motions, the bloodstains on the ground had disappeared into the whirling vortex, and the troll popped the end onto the dead human's neck. With a slurp, the machine began to drain them dry.

Showtime. I stepped out into the middle of the alleyway. "Whatcha doing there, big guy?" I called out, my voice echoing through the quiet.

The troll whipped around, his eyes widening as he caught sight of me, even though he never stopped pulling the blood with that machine. "This is none of your business, bean-sidhe. Go wail on some other corner," he muttered, his voice a raspy, low gravel.

I lifted my brows, approaching another couple steps forward. "Funny thing, this is where my wails brought me. So, if you want to stop your decapitation spree so I can get my beauty rest, any time would be appreciated."


"This continues until the blood feud's been claimed. I'm just the messenger," he said with a shrug. The vacuum spluttered for a couple seconds as a fat burst of blood flooded through, the slurping sounds grating. I'd seen too many dead bodies to summon anything more than annoyed disgust, but irritation at being kept from my bed rode me in a fierce way. A glint caught my eye from the base of the vacuum, right around the knobs from a bronze seal of the letter F with a circle around it, one I recognized all too well. A certain Nocker would have some questions to answer.

I heaved out a sigh, crossing my arms over my chest. "And who might you be errand boy for?" I asked, dreading the answer.

"Montaignes of House Balor," he replied as he tugged the vacuum tube away and turned the contraption off.

I let out a groan. "Of course, the Montaignes." Out of any one of the noble families, they produced the most obstinate holier-than-thou pricks on this side of the Dreaming. —





I'd know — I'd dated one of the bastards. Irritation rolled through me at the memories of Duke Julian Montaigne, of the petty arguments we'd had, and of the condescending tone he took when we talked. After a short month together, I got fed up and ditched. In return, he'd dragged my name in the dirt among every social circle around.

When it came to petty vendettas, Julian ruled as king.

• • •

Even though my bed called my name in a fierce way, I trudged on over to O'Conner's. I sucked on a lozenge I'd nabbed from home, one of the mistakenly chosen eucalyptus-menthol variety, a true displeasure on the tongue. Amidst dozens of dive bars lining the street, most collecting cigarette smoke and vomit-streaked sidewalks, O'Conner's remained a true gem, a slice of Ireland.

My hand rested on the carved wooden doorknob, the monolith of a door made from the same oak as the interior. I inhaled deep, the reappearance of the Montaignes still on my mind when I opened the door.

A burst of heat cascaded over me, followed by the scents of nutty, rich ale and the roast pork sandwiches they were famous for. O'Conner's teemed with changelings, from the clurichaun waitress ducking over to a table full of pooka, to the two trolls having a post-work drink, hunched over the massive oaken tables. A couple glances flicked my way, folks who must've heard all my wailing during this outbreak of murders.

I wove my way through the main floor, angling towards the bar on the far side. A couple folks already sat on the worn red stools, tipping back pints of Hearth and Home, their famous amber homebrew. Not every place had access to beer that not only was damn tasty but also gave a dose of Glamour, thanks to Fergus and his crazy contraptions.


The stained-glass windows of the bar were a thing of beauty, made with a bit of that tinker charm that allowed sunlit rays to trickle through the window at any hour, even on the blackest night. The dappled colors splayed over my skin as I approached the bar right in time for Liara to step in front of the taps.

"Folks behaving tonight?" I asked, slipping into a seat, and leaning forward over the polished onyx of the countertop.

Liara lifted a brow, her cheeks ruddy from running around the place; the woman never stopped moving. While Fergus's contraptions made O'Conner's one of a kind, Liara was the reason their customers returned. The boggan never let anyone go hungry.

"Why does that sound like you're planning on starting trouble, Carrie O'Neill?" Liara responded, not pausing for a moment as she grabbed a pint glass from beneath the bar and filled it full of that delicious ale. Not like I'd ever turn down a pint.

"Never trouble for you," I said with a grin, swallowing the rest of the horrid lozenge. Liara passed the pint over, a faint smile playing on her lips. "I reserve all my trouble-making for your business partner." Drops of condensation printed on my palm as I lifted the ale to my lips, letting the first sip wash over me. The taste rolled through me with the languor of honey, the hope of first dawn's light as it crept over the horizon, and the warmth of a hearth in the dead of winter.



“Fergus is in the back, dear.” Liara’s lips pursed in concern. “What trouble has he gotten himself into now?”

“Nothing that can’t be fixed quick.” I hopped up from my stool. “Watch my pint for me?” Liara nodded in response. The workshop in the back was no secret, but only those bold enough dared step back there. I’d had to dodge minor explosions, blasts of some jelly he swore was flammable, and a slick indistinguishable oil that smelled like cabbage and refused to come out for a week.

On top of that, the lock bordered on ridiculous, a mess of cogs and traps for those stupid enough to walk in unannounced. Except I knew all the combinations. I punched in the numbers, watching the cogs whirr as a bit of steam puffed out a whistle on the top, and one by one, the locks undid themselves. When the final one clicked open, I placed my hand on the knob and opened the door with a creak.

“Go away,” a voice called out, the same cranky one I’d heard for years now. I pursed my lips. Like hell I would. If he was selling tools and machines to my stuffy, holier-than-thou ex-boyfriend, then Fergus could spare a second.

“Where’s Julian?” I asked. No use wasting small talk on him. He hunched over his workbench, soot staining his wrinkled work-shirt, and the tool belt around his waist grew heavier by the second. His elbows stuck out, as knobby as the rest of him, while he twisted a screwdriver around an old clock, taking out parts.

“Not here,” he grumbled, though I noticed the jump in his shoulders at the mention of the name. “Sold the damn machine to his lackey, something about getting stains out of the carpet.”

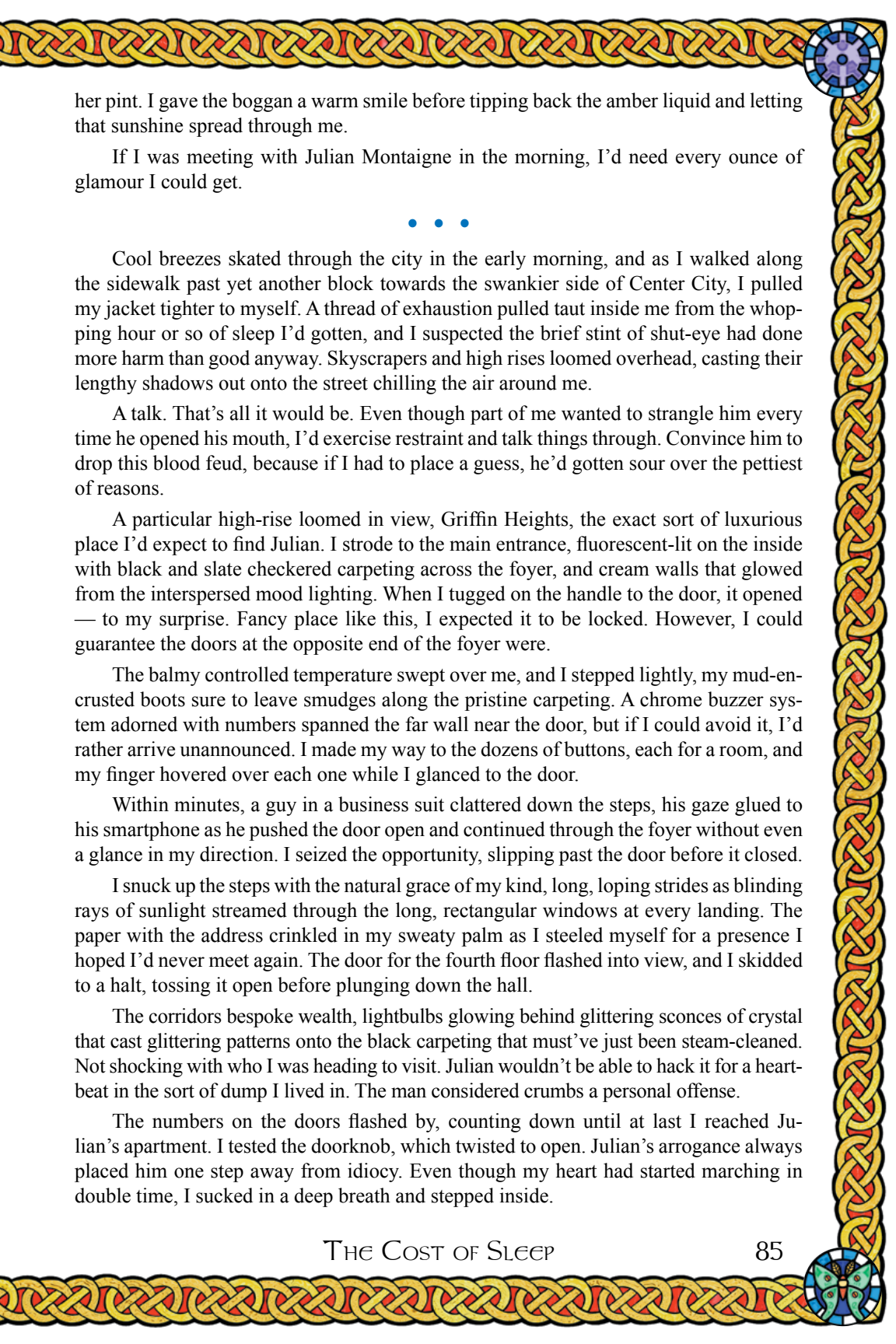
Ah, so he didn’t know what Julian actually used his creation for. I sidled to his workbench, fishing around in my pockets. “Are you sure you don’t know? Because I heard you’ve been looking for new glass for the windows, and I might have some unique pieces on me.”

With a clink, I lowered the bag of stained glass I’d been squirreling away for an occasion like this. Fergus might’ve been reasoned with given time, but I didn’t have a lot of that, not if I wanted a decent night’s sleep any time soon. Those gleaming black eyes of his narrowed as he snatched the bag, rooting through the insides with an enthusiasm he didn’t bother hiding. Those knobby fingers paused on the chosen pieces of glass, and he tugged one of the blue-green pieces out, his thumb skating over the surface over and over again.

Fergus heaved a sigh and pulled out a piece of paper and a pen. I kept my face blank, even though a smile threatened to curve my lips. I’d won him over.

“Here,” he said, passing her the sheet. “Address is there. Take the ponce down a couple pegs, Carrie.” His lips crinkled with what might be construed as a smile before it faded back to his normal dour frown.

I didn’t wait around to be dismissed. “Thanks, boss.” I snatched the paper up and made my way to the door at once. Fergus made some strangled sound in return as I shut the door behind me, stepping back into the flow of the bar. The full tables, even at this hour were testament to the lasting collaboration between Liara and Fergus, this safe haven for all sorts of beasties. I slid onto the stool I’d left empty, and Liara passed back



her pint. I gave the boggan a warm smile before tipping back the amber liquid and letting that sunshine spread through me.

If I was meeting with Julian Montaigne in the morning, I'd need every ounce of glamour I could get.



Cool breezes skated through the city in the early morning, and as I walked along the sidewalk past yet another block towards the swankier side of Center City, I pulled my jacket tighter to myself. A thread of exhaustion pulled taut inside me from the whopping hour or so of sleep I'd gotten, and I suspected the brief stint of shut-eye had done more harm than good anyway. Skyscrapers and high rises loomed overhead, casting their lengthy shadows out onto the street chilling the air around me.

A talk. That's all it would be. Even though part of me wanted to strangle him every time he opened his mouth, I'd exercise restraint and talk things through. Convince him to drop this blood feud, because if I had to place a guess, he'd gotten sour over the pettiest of reasons.

A particular high-rise loomed in view, Griffin Heights, the exact sort of luxurious place I'd expect to find Julian. I strode to the main entrance, fluorescent-lit on the inside with black and slate checkered carpeting across the foyer, and cream walls that glowed from the interspersed mood lighting. When I tugged on the handle to the door, it opened — to my surprise. Fancy place like this, I expected it to be locked. However, I could guarantee the doors at the opposite end of the foyer were.

The balmy controlled temperature swept over me, and I stepped lightly, my mud-encrusted boots sure to leave smudges along the pristine carpeting. A chrome buzzer system adorned with numbers spanned the far wall near the door, but if I could avoid it, I'd rather arrive unannounced. I made my way to the dozens of buttons, each for a room, and my finger hovered over each one while I glanced to the door.


Within minutes, a guy in a business suit clattered down the steps, his gaze glued to his smartphone as he pushed the door open and continued through the foyer without even a glance in my direction. I seized the opportunity, slipping past the door before it closed.

I snuck up the steps with the natural grace of my kind, long, loping strides as blinding rays of sunlight streamed through the long, rectangular windows at every landing. The paper with the address crinkled in my sweaty palm as I steeled myself for a presence I hoped I'd never meet again. The door for the fourth floor flashed into view, and I skidded to a halt, tossing it open before plunging down the hall.

The corridors bespoke wealth, lightbulbs glowing behind glittering sconces of crystal that cast glittering patterns onto the black carpeting that must've just been steam-cleaned. Not shocking with who I was heading to visit. Julian wouldn't be able to hack it for a heartbeat in the sort of dump I lived in. The man considered crumbs a personal offense.

The numbers on the doors flashed by, counting down until at last I reached Julian's apartment. I tested the doorknob, which twisted to open. Julian's arrogance always placed him one step away from idiocy. Even though my heart had started marching in double time, I sucked in a deep breath and stepped inside.





I hadn't taken two steps in when a large, bluish hand flashed in front of my face. Before I could blink, that hand wrapped around my throat and I found myself a foot off the ground, boots dangling in the air. I tried to swallow to no avail, my breath sticking in my chest as I tried to force words out.

"What are *you* doing here?" the voice booming at me was a familiar one. My brows furrowed together as I gasped for whatever wisps of breath traveled down my throat. My nails latched onto the thick forearm of the giant holding me aloft. I scratched down, struggling to get out of the grasp.

"Darryl, let her go," an even more familiar voice drawled from the opposite side of the room. "She's all wail, no bite."

At once, the hand around my throat released and I collapsed to the ground. Sweet bursts of air circled through my chest as I heaved up and down, trying to gasp in as much air as possible.

"She was lurking around in the alley, boss," Darryl argued, his looming presence beside her casting a shadow. The troll from earlier, one of his butcher boys. My palms pressed to the polished planks of the floor, but I focused on composing myself before I'd look up and deal with the owner of this apartment.

My chin jutted forward with irritation that had reached a full boil at this point, partly from lack of sleep and partly from the obnoxious ex. I stood, dusting my pants off before looking up to meet Julian's gaze.

He perched on a carved mahogany chair with an arrogant air that turned it into a throne. The sneer on his lips didn't change, but the moment I stood upright in front of him, those violet eyes widened. Even given their time apart, the man remained stunning like most of the sidhe with a noble arch to his nose, sharp-defined chin, and a tall, towering stature that served to fuel the idea that everyone and their mother was beneath him.

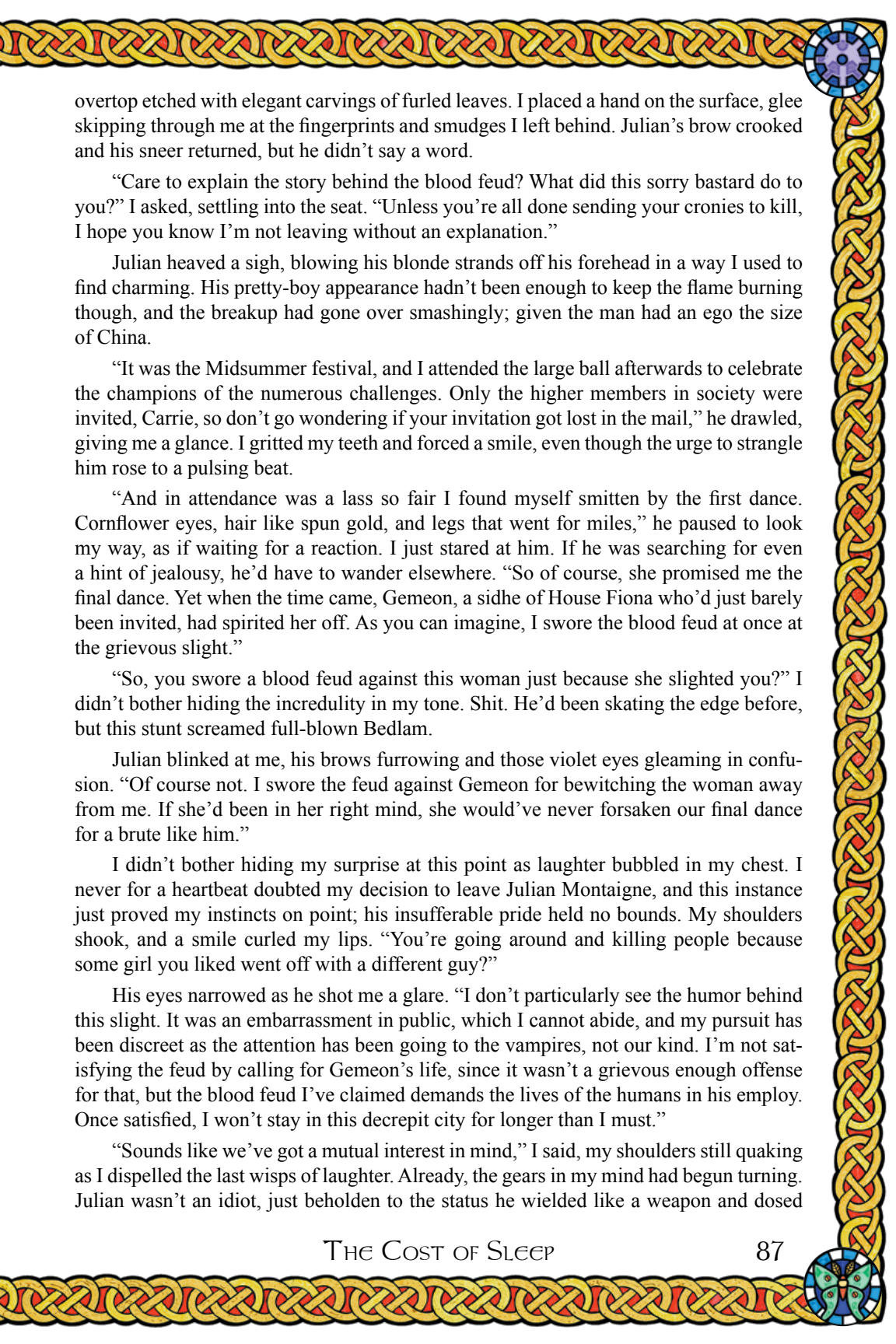
"Carrie O'Neill, as I live and breathe. You're so desperate as to track me to my apartment?" A mocking smile played on his lips even though he didn't budge from his relaxed stance, his palms resting on the edge of the chair arms.

I clenched my jaw tight, biting back the acid words that begged to leap from my tongue. Squabbling with him over nothing would just add more problems to my already teeming load, and I wanted this mess resolved fast so he could get the hell out of my town.

"Funny thing," I began, tapping into every ounce of resolve to keep my tone level. "I'm simply searching for the sonofabitch whose blood feud is leaving a trail of bodies through Philly. I haven't gotten an ounce of sleep since it began." I crossed my arms over my chest and eyed him, feigning innocence. "You wouldn't happen to know who's responsible?"

"Dear, you wouldn't last a second in the courts," he said with a smirk. "If that's your attempt at fishing for information, it's cruder than a human's. Unfortunately, you'll have to endure. I have a blood feud to collect and once something like that is sworn, I can't very well rescind it."

I didn't wait for the invitation that wasn't going to come and snagged one of the free seats by his large kitchen table, a monstrosity spanning half the room, with a glass pane



overtop etched with elegant carvings of furled leaves. I placed a hand on the surface, glee skipping through me at the fingerprints and smudges I left behind. Julian's brow crooked and his sneer returned, but he didn't say a word.

"Care to explain the story behind the blood feud? What did this sorry bastard do to you?" I asked, settling into the seat. "Unless you're all done sending your cronies to kill, I hope you know I'm not leaving without an explanation."

Julian heaved a sigh, blowing his blonde strands off his forehead in a way I used to find charming. His pretty-boy appearance hadn't been enough to keep the flame burning though, and the breakup had gone over smashingly; given the man had an ego the size of China.

"It was the Midsummer festival, and I attended the large ball afterwards to celebrate the champions of the numerous challenges. Only the higher members in society were invited, Carrie, so don't go wondering if your invitation got lost in the mail," he drawled, giving me a glance. I gritted my teeth and forced a smile, even though the urge to strangle him rose to a pulsing beat.

"And in attendance was a lass so fair I found myself smitten by the first dance. Cornflower eyes, hair like spun gold, and legs that went for miles," he paused to look my way, as if waiting for a reaction. I just stared at him. If he was searching for even a hint of jealousy, he'd have to wander elsewhere. "So of course, she promised me the final dance. Yet when the time came, Gemeon, a sidhe of House Fiona who'd just barely been invited, had spirited her off. As you can imagine, I swore the blood feud at once at the grievous slight."


"So, you swore a blood feud against this woman just because she slighted you?" I didn't bother hiding the incredulity in my tone. Shit. He'd been skating the edge before, but this stunt screamed full-blown Bedlam.

Julian blinked at me, his brows furrowing and those violet eyes gleaming in confusion. "Of course not. I swore the feud against Gemeon for bewitching the woman away from me. If she'd been in her right mind, she would've never forsaken our final dance for a brute like him."

I didn't bother hiding my surprise at this point as laughter bubbled in my chest. I never for a heartbeat doubted my decision to leave Julian Montaigne, and this instance just proved my instincts on point; his insufferable pride held no bounds. My shoulders shook, and a smile curled my lips. "You're going around and killing people because some girl you liked went off with a different guy?"

His eyes narrowed as he shot me a glare. "I don't particularly see the humor behind this slight. It was an embarrassment in public, which I cannot abide, and my pursuit has been discreet as the attention has been going to the vampires, not our kind. I'm not satisfying the feud by calling for Gemeon's life, since it wasn't a grievous enough offense for that, but the blood feud I've claimed demands the lives of the humans in his employ. Once satisfied, I won't stay in this decrepit city for longer than I must."

"Sounds like we've got a mutual interest in mind," I said, my shoulders still quaking as I dispelled the last wisps of laughter. Already, the gears in my mind had begun turning. Julian wasn't an idiot, just beholden to the status he wielded like a weapon and dosed



with an incurable case of crazy. “After all, you want to be out of this city, and I can’t wait to get you out. If you can agree to meet me at O’Conner’s tonight, I’ll have a solution to your problem.”

Julian crooked a brow as he leaned back in his seat, those violet eyes sharp with cunning as he considered my proposition.

“Why should I believe you want to help me?” he asked. “There’s no trust between the two of us.”

“Exactly why you should believe I want to help,” I argued. “Because not only do I want you out of my city, but I also want a full night’s rest, which I haven’t gotten in weeks. If you’re worried, you can even bring your posse of trolls to beat me down if I attempt trouble.”

That seemed to placate him, as he extended a hand out. “Then a deal it is, Carrie O’Neill.”

I gripped his hand tight and shook, eager to ditch his ornate apartment and get to work. If I was going to pull this off, I had a lot of work to get done before their meeting tonight. Finding Gemeon wouldn’t be the problem; convincing him to fall in with my plan would be.



This early in the night, the scent of roast pork wafted through the door of O’Conner’s, setting my stomach to rumbling. I’d made the phone call to Gemeon and had exercised more than a little sway with the Chicanery I kept quiet. However, whether he’d follow through with what we’d discussed would be decided tonight, at my rendezvous here.

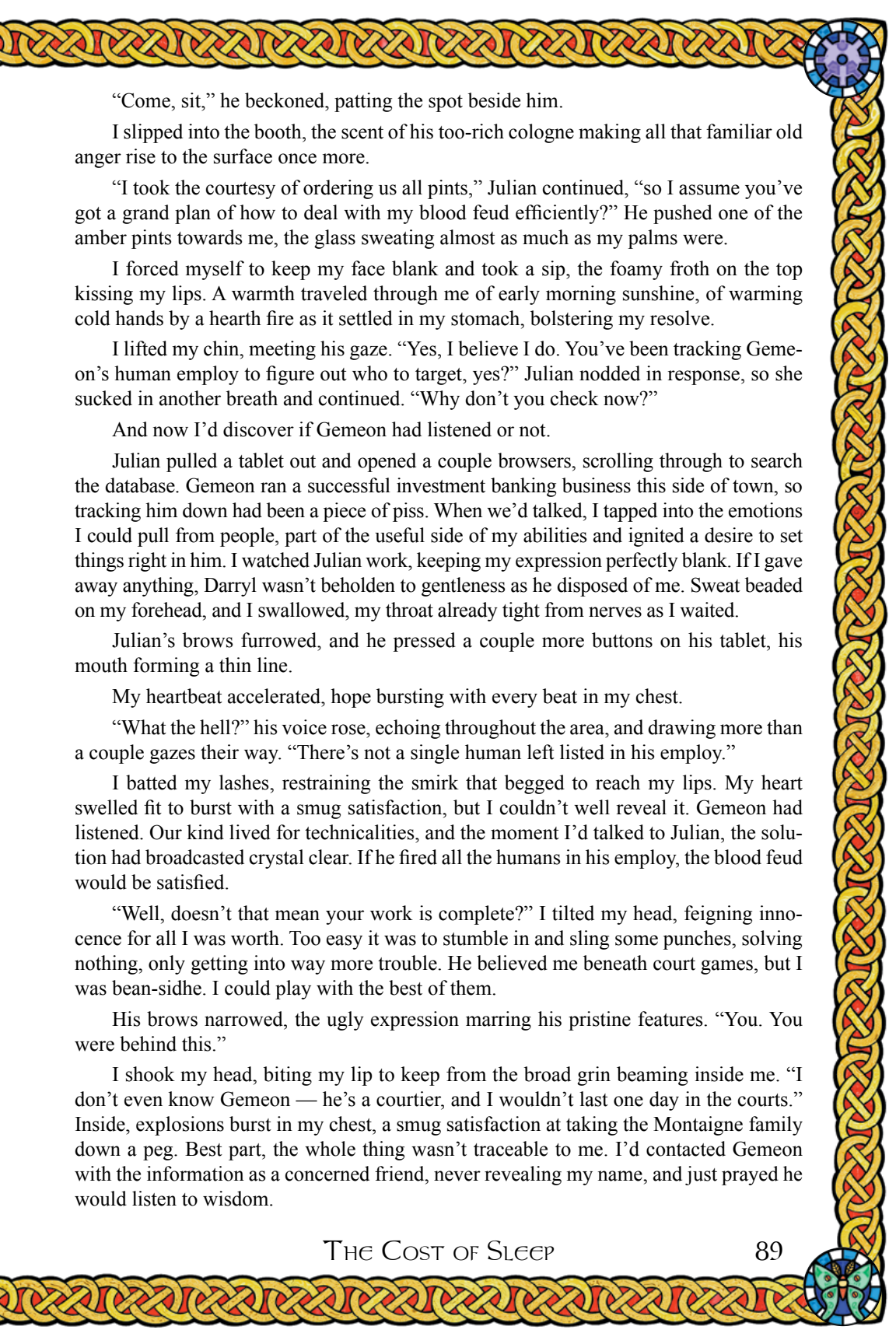
My eyes burned at this point, the lack of sleep and constant state of busy wearing me to the bone, and unease stirred in my stomach. While Julian’s descent to crazy had my nerves rattling, what scared me worse was the idea of pissing off Fergus or Liara by causing a ruckus in their bar. For lonely changelings like me adrift in this land with few connections, this place had become my sanctuary. I walked in, my boots clipping across the tiled floor. Already, O’Conner’s bustled with people, their dinner rush, but I headed straight for the booth in the corner, which I’d asked Liara to save.

Darryl’s large form hunched into the one side of the booth, meaning Julian had already arrived. Perfect. My heart thudded in my chest, anxious energy coursing through my veins. Pull this off and I’d be free of Julian and the havoc his blood feud caused. If I failed, I’d be stuck upholding my promise to help and working with the ex of my nightmares. Bile rose in my throat at the thought of that. Even though my stomach grumbled, I wasn’t quite ready to eat just yet.

I waved at Liara who stood behind the bar, pulling down the tap to dispense another glamour pint for the needy masses. The boggan winked at me, never stopping in her work. I sucked in a deep breath, steeled myself, and marched over to the booth Julian already contaminated. Showtime.

Darryl caught my gaze first, shooting me a glare. Since he took up most of his side of the booth, that left me the space beside Julian, whose violet eyes glittered with amusement; a cruel smile curling his lips.





“Come, sit,” he beckoned, patting the spot beside him.

I slipped into the booth, the scent of his too-rich cologne making all that familiar old anger rise to the surface once more.

“I took the courtesy of ordering us all pints,” Julian continued, “so I assume you’ve got a grand plan of how to deal with my blood feud efficiently?” He pushed one of the amber pints towards me, the glass sweating almost as much as my palms were.

I forced myself to keep my face blank and took a sip, the foamy froth on the top kissing my lips. A warmth traveled through me of early morning sunshine, of warming cold hands by a hearth fire as it settled in my stomach, bolstering my resolve.

I lifted my chin, meeting his gaze. “Yes, I believe I do. You’ve been tracking Gemeon’s human employ to figure out who to target, yes?” Julian nodded in response, so she sucked in another breath and continued. “Why don’t you check now?”

And now I’d discover if Gemeon had listened or not.

Julian pulled a tablet out and opened a couple browsers, scrolling through to search the database. Gemeon ran a successful investment banking business this side of town, so tracking him down had been a piece of piss. When we’d talked, I tapped into the emotions I could pull from people, part of the useful side of my abilities and ignited a desire to set things right in him. I watched Julian work, keeping my expression perfectly blank. If I gave away anything, Darryl wasn’t beholden to gentleness as he disposed of me. Sweat beaded on my forehead, and I swallowed, my throat already tight from nerves as I waited.

Julian’s brows furrowed, and he pressed a couple more buttons on his tablet, his mouth forming a thin line.

My heartbeat accelerated, hope bursting with every beat in my chest.

“What the hell?” his voice rose, echoing throughout the area, and drawing more than a couple gazes their way. “There’s not a single human left listed in his employ.”

I batted my lashes, restraining the smirk that begged to reach my lips. My heart swelled fit to burst with a smug satisfaction, but I couldn’t well reveal it. Gemeon had listened. Our kind lived for technicalities, and the moment I’d talked to Julian, the solution had broadcasted crystal clear. If he fired all the humans in his employ, the blood feud would be satisfied.

“Well, doesn’t that mean your work is complete?” I tilted my head, feigning innocence for all I was worth. Too easy it was to stumble in and sling some punches, solving nothing, only getting into way more trouble. He believed me beneath court games, but I was bean-sidhe. I could play with the best of them.

His brows narrowed, the ugly expression marring his pristine features. “You. You were behind this.”

I shook my head, biting my lip to keep from the broad grin beaming inside me. “I don’t even know Gemeon — he’s a courtier, and I wouldn’t last one day in the courts.” Inside, explosions burst in my chest, a smug satisfaction at taking the Montaigne family down a peg. Best part, the whole thing wasn’t traceable to me. I’d contacted Gemeon with the information as a concerned friend, never revealing my name, and just prayed he would listen to wisdom.

I kept my composure while I lifted my pint, chugging the rest of my ale. Julian slammed the tablet so hard on the table it broke, his jaw clenched tight, and his violet eyes lit with anger. Darryl's shoulders tensed as he braced for a directive from his boss, but unless he had direct proof, I was untouchable.

I placed my empty glass on the table with a delicate clink, the remaining foam sliding down the sides. "Well, gentleman, it seems like my services are no longer needed since your blood feud is satisfied." Holding back my smug grin took everything I was worth, but somehow, I managed.

"You're behind this, Carrie," Julian accused, still stuck in disbelief that his petty squabble had been resolved to his dissatisfaction. "You're in a world of trouble."

I gave him a pretty smile, my eyes burning with a mixture of glee and the hate that sparked between them. "If you've no proof, you've no reason to stay in this city. Now, since I'm no longer needed, hope you'll excuse me. I have a bed calling to me." I tipped two fingers in his direction as a salute before sauntering towards the door.

Even though my stomach rumbled for a sandwich, I could heat something at home. The second I stepped out of O'Conner's and my boots hit the asphalt, a brilliant grin rolled across my face, and all the giddiness bouncing around in my chest poured out. Honks sounded in the distance from the cars whizzing by, and loud murmurs came from every direction with folks strolling along the sidewalks post-work. The glow of street lamps and headlights glided over me, and I just let myself beam, a bounce in my step that I hadn't felt in a long time.

When Julian and I had split, he'd spread my name in the dirt in every social circle that existed, but what could I do? I didn't have troll retainers or bushels of cash, and half the time my curse distracted me from any endeavors I tried. This was the payback I had sorely needed. Getting Julian Montaigne out of my city and stopping this rash of murders had been first priority, and I'd pulled it all off.

Now, to claim my reward. I really needed some sleep.





# SUMMER GIRL

*By Wren Handman*

Summer to me will always be synonymous with an old white barn; with heat so intense we used to lie perfectly still and watch it shimmer in the air; and with her.

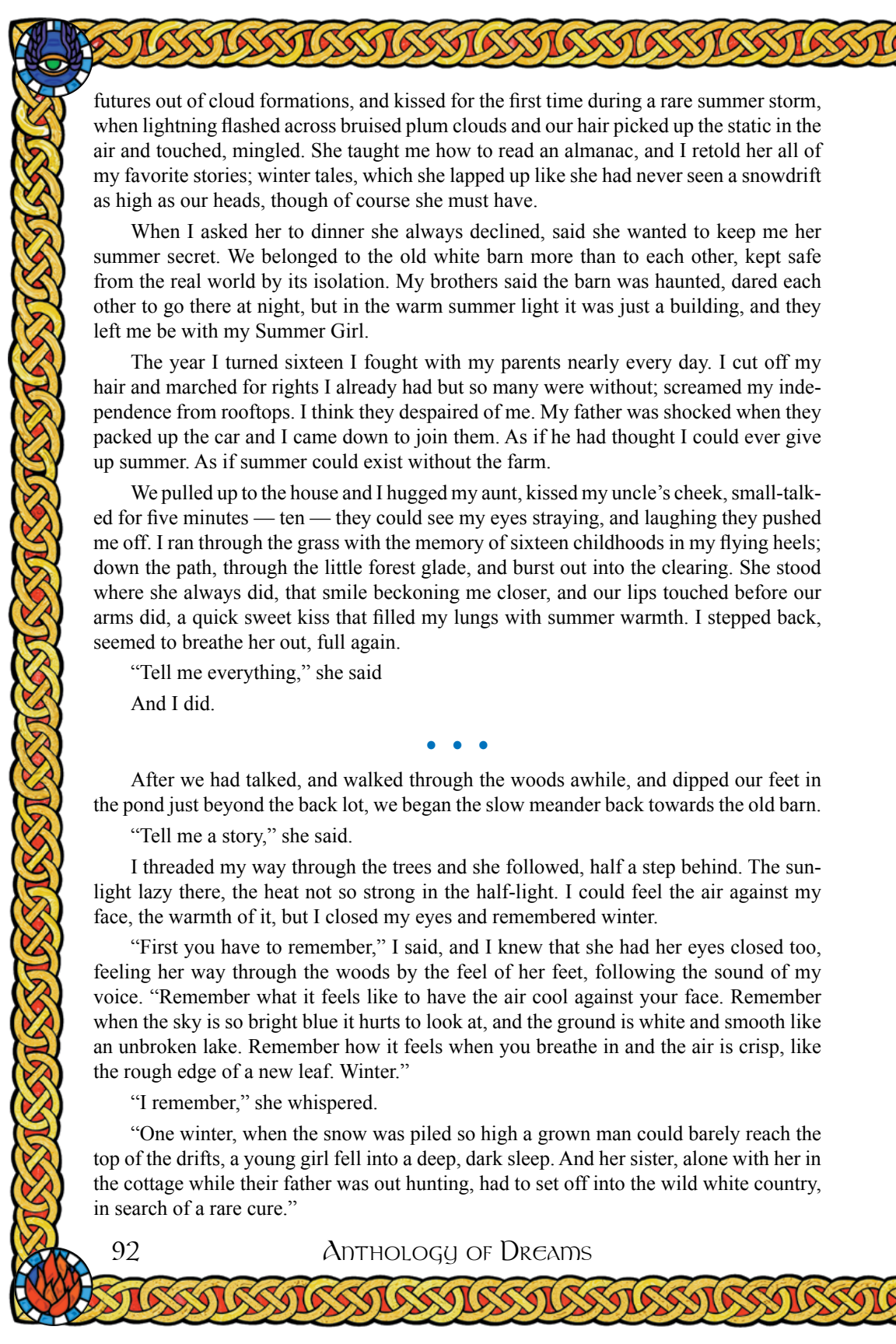
At the time she seemed an indivisible part of her surroundings. On the last day of school, I would run home, hair flying, barely waving a goodbye to the friends who would linger on the concrete steps, stretching out their goodbyes as long as they could. My mother would have packed my bags the night before, and I would bounce for hours in the backseat of the car, stretching my fingers across the cool glass, every moment bringing me closer to her. Before the car was even parked I would bail out the door, sparing a wave for my relatives as I flew through the knee-high grasses, down the property line, through the evergreen forest, and out to the backlot.

She would be waiting (how did she always know?), a lazy smile across her pale lips, an indolent expression belied by the twitch in her fingers as I grew closer, closer, until we collided in laughter, fell rolling across the little patch of grass still green and wrestled and hugged and at last lay panting, staring up at the sky, our fingers barely touching.

Her hair was wheaty-red, the same color as the dried crisp plants that lay in halfhearted rows around the tumble-down building. Her dress was the same muddy white as the walls whose paint we used to peel and flick at each other, like she was a living arm of the old outbuilding.

The boys came to the farm to learn to be men, they said, but my mother had long abandoned the hope that I would someday be a lady, and so while they toiled in the fields and grew up, I slipped away from baking and canning and women's laughter, and had untold adventures with my Summer Girl. We stripped to our underwear and swam in the splash of water that ran between my uncle's farm and the next lot. We learned to fight with branches we called swords, and saved each other from dread dragons. We picked our





futures out of cloud formations, and kissed for the first time during a rare summer storm, when lightning flashed across bruised plum clouds and our hair picked up the static in the air and touched, mingled. She taught me how to read an almanac, and I retold her all of my favorite stories; winter tales, which she lapped up like she had never seen a snowdrift as high as our heads, though of course she must have.

When I asked her to dinner she always declined, said she wanted to keep me her summer secret. We belonged to the old white barn more than to each other, kept safe from the real world by its isolation. My brothers said the barn was haunted, dared each other to go there at night, but in the warm summer light it was just a building, and they left me be with my Summer Girl.

The year I turned sixteen I fought with my parents nearly every day. I cut off my hair and marched for rights I already had but so many were without; screamed my independence from rooftops. I think they despaired of me. My father was shocked when they packed up the car and I came down to join them. As if he had thought I could ever give up summer. As if summer could exist without the farm.

We pulled up to the house and I hugged my aunt, kissed my uncle's cheek, small-talked for five minutes — ten — they could see my eyes straying, and laughing they pushed me off. I ran through the grass with the memory of sixteen childhoods in my flying heels; down the path, through the little forest glade, and burst out into the clearing. She stood where she always did, that smile beckoning me closer, and our lips touched before our arms did, a quick sweet kiss that filled my lungs with summer warmth. I stepped back, seemed to breathe her out, full again.

"Tell me everything," she said

And I did.

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After we had talked, and walked through the woods awhile, and dipped our feet in the pond just beyond the back lot, we began the slow meander back towards the old barn.

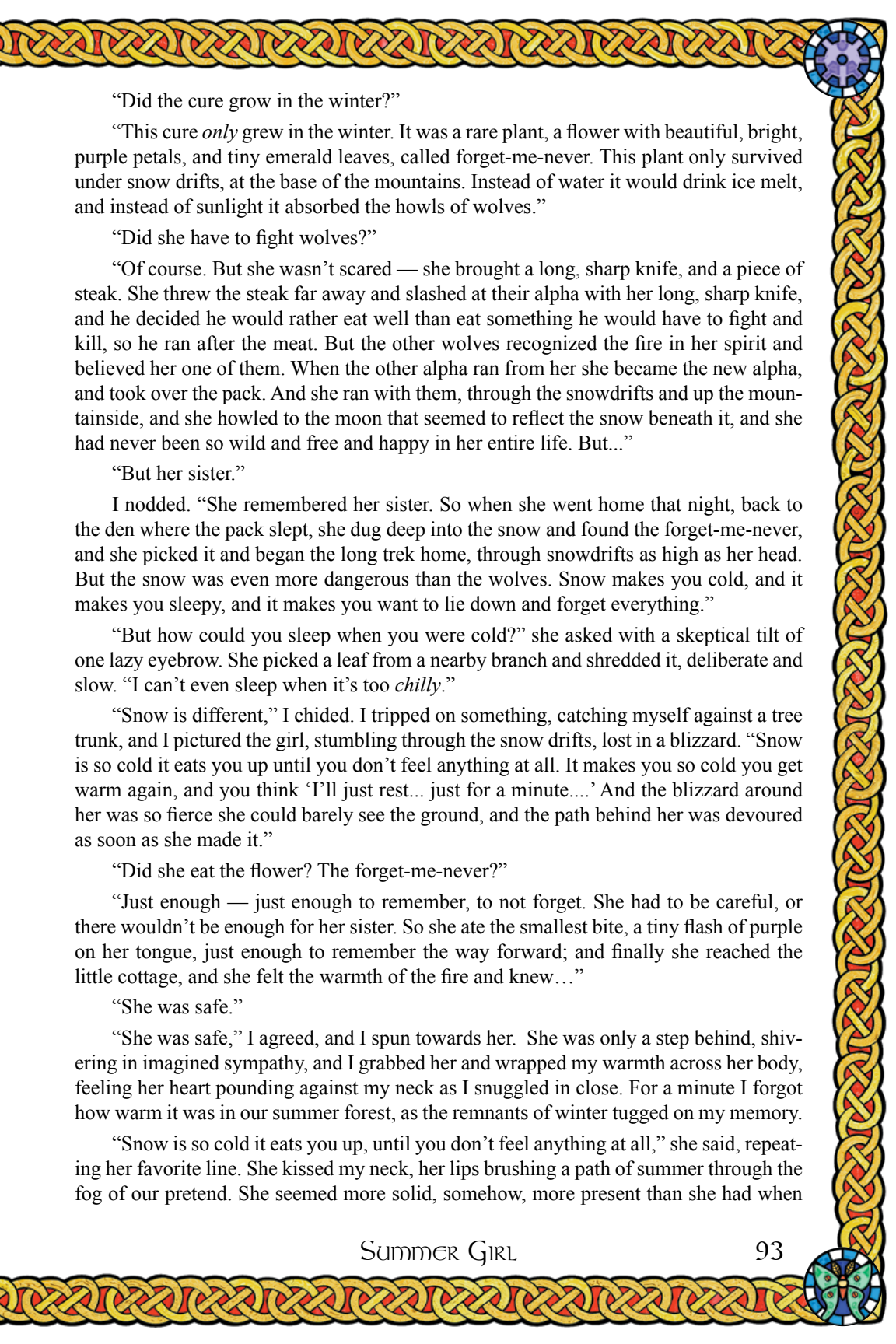
"Tell me a story," she said.

I threaded my way through the trees and she followed, half a step behind. The sunlight lazy there, the heat not so strong in the half-light. I could feel the air against my face, the warmth of it, but I closed my eyes and remembered winter.

"First you have to remember," I said, and I knew that she had her eyes closed too, feeling her way through the woods by the feel of her feet, following the sound of my voice. "Remember what it feels like to have the air cool against your face. Remember when the sky is so bright blue it hurts to look at, and the ground is white and smooth like an unbroken lake. Remember how it feels when you breathe in and the air is crisp, like the rough edge of a new leaf. Winter."

"I remember," she whispered.

"One winter, when the snow was piled so high a grown man could barely reach the top of the drifts, a young girl fell into a deep, dark sleep. And her sister, alone with her in the cottage while their father was out hunting, had to set off into the wild white country, in search of a rare cure."



“Did the cure grow in the winter?”

“This cure *only* grew in the winter. It was a rare plant, a flower with beautiful, bright, purple petals, and tiny emerald leaves, called forget-me-never. This plant only survived under snow drifts, at the base of the mountains. Instead of water it would drink ice melt, and instead of sunlight it absorbed the howls of wolves.”

“Did she have to fight wolves?”

“Of course. But she wasn’t scared — she brought a long, sharp knife, and a piece of steak. She threw the steak far away and slashed at their alpha with her long, sharp knife, and he decided he would rather eat well than eat something he would have to fight and kill, so he ran after the meat. But the other wolves recognized the fire in her spirit and believed her one of them. When the other alpha ran from her she became the new alpha, and took over the pack. And she ran with them, through the snowdrifts and up the mountainside, and she howled to the moon that seemed to reflect the snow beneath it, and she had never been so wild and free and happy in her entire life. But...”

“But her sister.”

I nodded. “She remembered her sister. So when she went home that night, back to the den where the pack slept, she dug deep into the snow and found the forget-me-never, and she picked it and began the long trek home, through snowdrifts as high as her head. But the snow was even more dangerous than the wolves. Snow makes you cold, and it makes you sleepy, and it makes you want to lie down and forget everything.”

“But how could you sleep when you were cold?” she asked with a skeptical tilt of one lazy eyebrow. She picked a leaf from a nearby branch and shredded it, deliberate and slow. “I can’t even sleep when it’s too *chilly*.”

“Snow is different,” I chided. I tripped on something, catching myself against a tree trunk, and I pictured the girl, stumbling through the snow drifts, lost in a blizzard. “Snow is so cold it eats you up until you don’t feel anything at all. It makes you so cold you get warm again, and you think ‘I’ll just rest... just for a minute....’ And the blizzard around her was so fierce she could barely see the ground, and the path behind her was devoured as soon as she made it.”

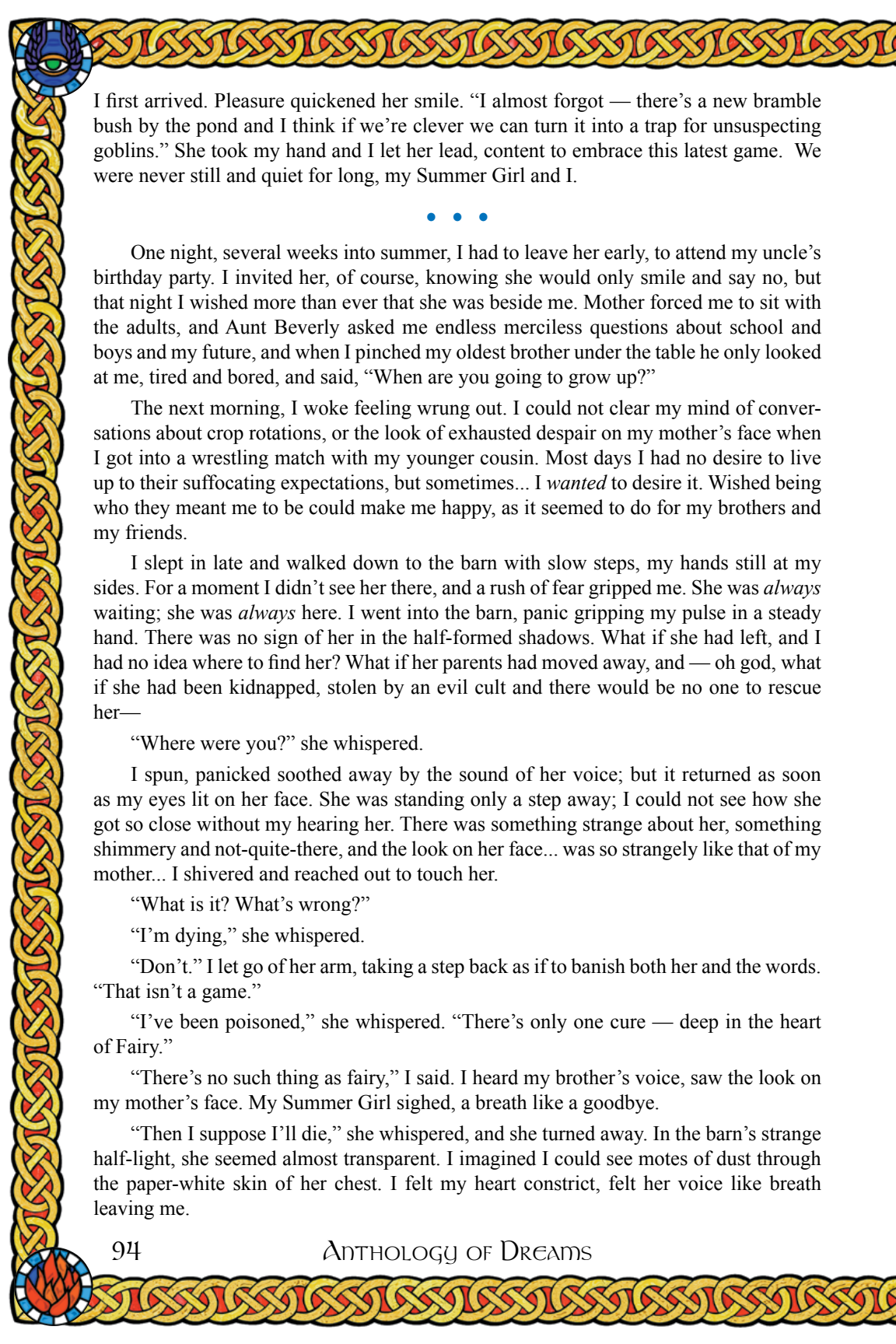
“Did she eat the flower? The forget-me-never?”

“Just enough — just enough to remember, to not forget. She had to be careful, or there wouldn’t be enough for her sister. So she ate the smallest bite, a tiny flash of purple on her tongue, just enough to remember the way forward; and finally she reached the little cottage, and she felt the warmth of the fire and knew...”

“She was safe.”

“She was safe,” I agreed, and I spun towards her. She was only a step behind, shivering in imagined sympathy, and I grabbed her and wrapped my warmth across her body, feeling her heart pounding against my neck as I snuggled in close. For a minute I forgot how warm it was in our summer forest, as the remnants of winter tugged on my memory.

“Snow is so cold it eats you up, until you don’t feel anything at all,” she said, repeating her favorite line. She kissed my neck, her lips brushing a path of summer through the fog of our pretend. She seemed more solid, somehow, more present than she had when



I first arrived. Pleasure quickened her smile. “I almost forgot — there’s a new bramble bush by the pond and I think if we’re clever we can turn it into a trap for unsuspecting goblins.” She took my hand and I let her lead, content to embrace this latest game. We were never still and quiet for long, my Summer Girl and I.

• • •

One night, several weeks into summer, I had to leave her early, to attend my uncle’s birthday party. I invited her, of course, knowing she would only smile and say no, but that night I wished more than ever that she was beside me. Mother forced me to sit with the adults, and Aunt Beverly asked me endless merciless questions about school and boys and my future, and when I pinched my oldest brother under the table he only looked at me, tired and bored, and said, “When are you going to grow up?”

The next morning, I woke feeling wrung out. I could not clear my mind of conversations about crop rotations, or the look of exhausted despair on my mother’s face when I got into a wrestling match with my younger cousin. Most days I had no desire to live up to their suffocating expectations, but sometimes... I *wanted* to desire it. Wished being who they meant me to be could make me happy, as it seemed to do for my brothers and my friends.

I slept in late and walked down to the barn with slow steps, my hands still at my sides. For a moment I didn’t see her there, and a rush of fear gripped me. She was *always* waiting; she was *always* here. I went into the barn, panic gripping my pulse in a steady hand. There was no sign of her in the half-formed shadows. What if she had left, and I had no idea where to find her? What if her parents had moved away, and — oh god, what if she had been kidnapped, stolen by an evil cult and there would be no one to rescue her—

“Where were you?” she whispered.

I spun, panicked soothed away by the sound of her voice; but it returned as soon as my eyes lit on her face. She was standing only a step away; I could not see how she got so close without my hearing her. There was something strange about her, something shimmery and not-quite-there, and the look on her face... was so strangely like that of my mother... I shivered and reached out to touch her.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

“I’m dying,” she whispered.

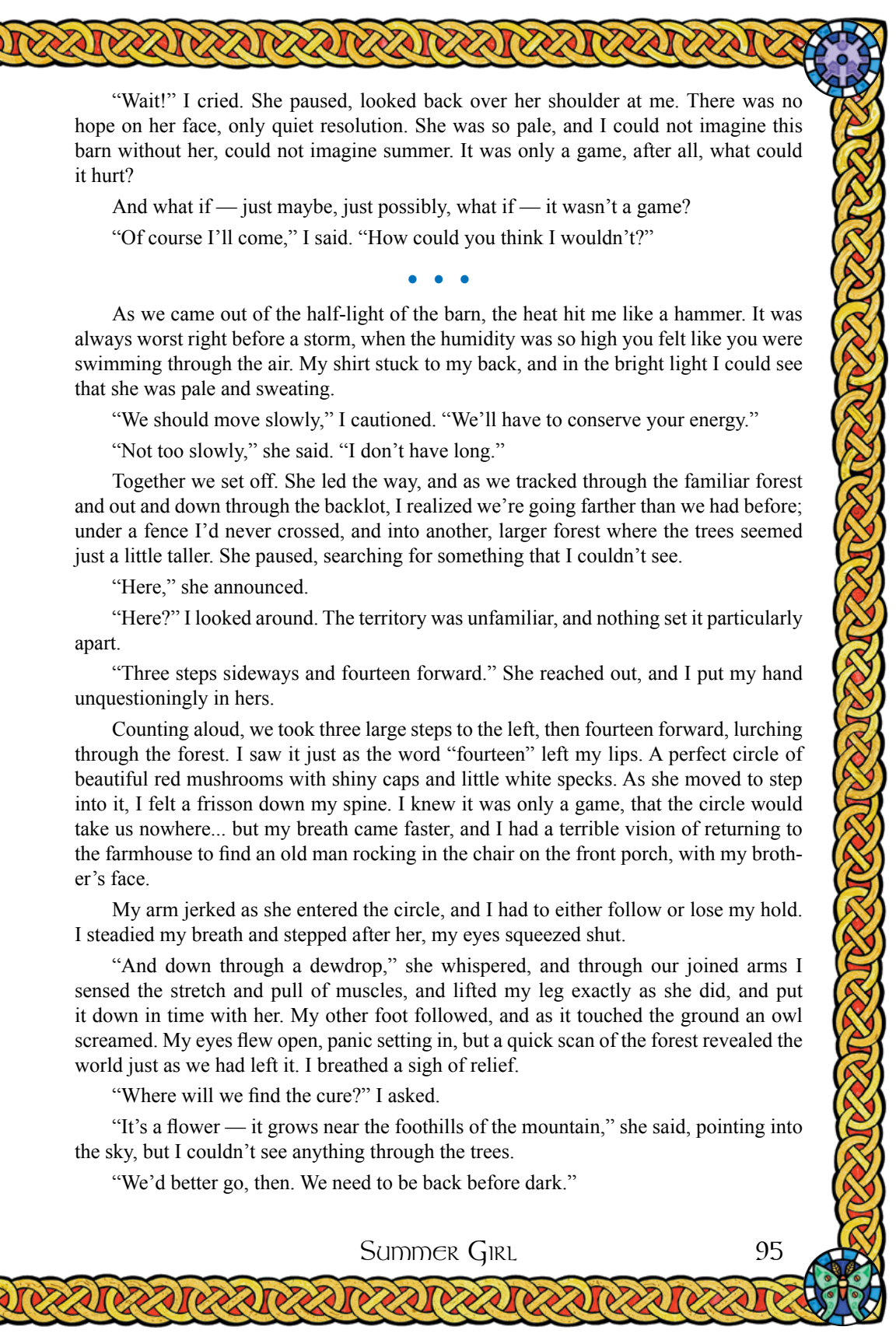
“Don’t.” I let go of her arm, taking a step back as if to banish both her and the words. “That isn’t a game.”

“I’ve been poisoned,” she whispered. “There’s only one cure — deep in the heart of Fairy.”

“There’s no such thing as fairy,” I said. I heard my brother’s voice, saw the look on my mother’s face. My Summer Girl sighed, a breath like a goodbye.

“Then I suppose I’ll die,” she whispered, and she turned away. In the barn’s strange half-light, she seemed almost transparent. I imagined I could see motes of dust through the paper-white skin of her chest. I felt my heart constrict, felt her voice like breath leaving me.





“Wait!” I cried. She paused, looked back over her shoulder at me. There was no hope on her face, only quiet resolution. She was so pale, and I could not imagine this barn without her, could not imagine summer. It was only a game, after all, what could it hurt?

And what if — just maybe, just possibly, what if — it wasn’t a game?

“Of course I’ll come,” I said. “How could you think I wouldn’t?”

• • •

As we came out of the half-light of the barn, the heat hit me like a hammer. It was always worst right before a storm, when the humidity was so high you felt like you were swimming through the air. My shirt stuck to my back, and in the bright light I could see that she was pale and sweating.

“We should move slowly,” I cautioned. “We’ll have to conserve your energy.”

“Not too slowly,” she said. “I don’t have long.”

Together we set off. She led the way, and as we tracked through the familiar forest and out and down through the backlot, I realized we’re going farther than we had before; under a fence I’d never crossed, and into another, larger forest where the trees seemed just a little taller. She paused, searching for something that I couldn’t see.

“Here,” she announced.

“Here?” I looked around. The territory was unfamiliar, and nothing set it particularly apart.

“Three steps sideways and fourteen forward.” She reached out, and I put my hand unquestioningly in hers.

Counting aloud, we took three large steps to the left, then fourteen forward, lurching through the forest. I saw it just as the word “fourteen” left my lips. A perfect circle of beautiful red mushrooms with shiny caps and little white specks. As she moved to step into it, I felt a frisson down my spine. I knew it was only a game, that the circle would take us nowhere... but my breath came faster, and I had a terrible vision of returning to the farmhouse to find an old man rocking in the chair on the front porch, with my brother’s face.


My arm jerked as she entered the circle, and I had to either follow or lose my hold. I steadied my breath and stepped after her, my eyes squeezed shut.

“And down through a dewdrop,” she whispered, and through our joined arms I sensed the stretch and pull of muscles, and lifted my leg exactly as she did, and put it down in time with her. My other foot followed, and as it touched the ground an owl screamed. My eyes flew open, panic setting in, but a quick scan of the forest revealed the world just as we had left it. I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Where will we find the cure?” I asked.

“It’s a flower — it grows near the foothills of the mountain,” she said, pointing into the sky, but I couldn’t see anything through the trees.

“We’d better go, then. We need to be back before dark.”



"We have to go quietly," she said, hushing her voice and releasing my hand. She stepped lightly through the layer of leaves that litters the forest floor. "There are *things* in the woods, and if they find us..."

"Quietly," I agreed, and together we made our way down the rough forest path.

• • •

We walked for half an hour before we reached a clearing in the woods. As we started across it my eyes were drawn by motion in the trees. Looking up, I saw the strangest sights: tiny decorations hung from the lowest branches of the tallest trees. They were made of twisted dried branches tied with dark red and muddy brown twine, and they formed shapes my eyes recognized but my mind couldn't place. Though I could not say why they made my stomach clench, and I caught her arm and lifted her attention upwards with a trembling hand.

"What are they?" I asked, and she let out a terrified breath.

"No — oh, no," she breathed. "Shinnikins."

"What do they mean?"

"They mark haunted places." She scanned the ground at our feet, breathless, and then pointed out a knot in the tree closest to us. "Do you see eyes?" she gasped.

Something rustled in the trees to our right. I shrieked and grabbed her arm, enjoying the thrill of terror even as I wondered if the sound was something other than a squirrel.

"We have to appease the spirits!" I said, getting into the game, "before they decide to never let us go!"

She nodded and grabbed a loose branch, sketching a quick circle in the dirt around us. "This will protect us until we can complete the ceremony. Do you have any salt?"

"I have peanuts. They're salted."

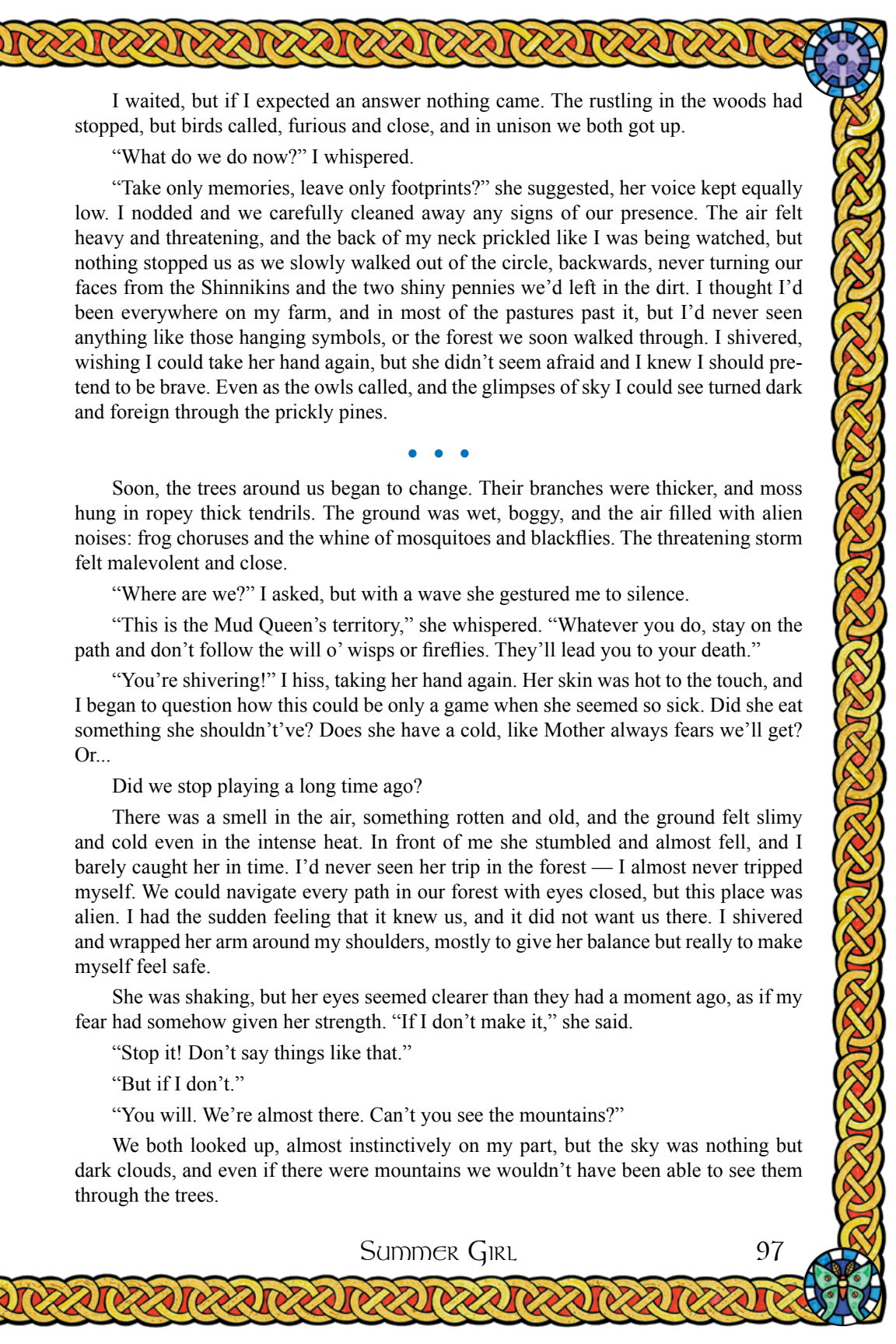
"Good enough."

I ripped open a bag of trail mix and scattered it around the circle. She knelt, sweat beading on her skin, and I could see her struggling to keep her eyes open even while she sketched answering symbols in the dirt. I emptied my pockets for something to give as an offering: there wasn't much there. A few rocks whose shape I liked, a pencil nub, and three pennies.

"What about the pennies?" I asked. "You put them on the eyes of the dead to pay their passage. Maybe we can pay our passage now while we're still alive."

"Perfect," she agreed. She lied down on the ground and I copied her, each of us putting a penny on our left eye. Surreptitiously I reached for her hand, and our fingers twined together on the dirt. "Oh spirits of the sky and air, oh spirits of the trees and plants, oh spirits of the spirit lands, hear us," she said. She stopped to have a coughing fit, and I squeezed her fingers harder and took over, coming up with supplications as I went.

"Oh spirits, we apologize for wandering into your sacred place. We didn't mean to trespass. We humbly offer you these pennies for our safe passage out of your haunted glen. Thank you."



I waited, but if I expected an answer nothing came. The rustling in the woods had stopped, but birds called, furious and close, and in unison we both got up.

“What do we do now?” I whispered.

“Take only memories, leave only footprints?” she suggested, her voice kept equally low. I nodded and we carefully cleaned away any signs of our presence. The air felt heavy and threatening, and the back of my neck prickled like I was being watched, but nothing stopped us as we slowly walked out of the circle, backwards, never turning our faces from the Shinnikins and the two shiny pennies we’d left in the dirt. I thought I’d been everywhere on my farm, and in most of the pastures past it, but I’d never seen anything like those hanging symbols, or the forest we soon walked through. I shivered, wishing I could take her hand again, but she didn’t seem afraid and I knew I should pretend to be brave. Even as the owls called, and the glimpses of sky I could see turned dark and foreign through the prickly pines.



Soon, the trees around us began to change. Their branches were thicker, and moss hung in ropey thick tendrils. The ground was wet, boggy, and the air filled with alien noises: frog choruses and the whine of mosquitoes and blackflies. The threatening storm felt malevolent and close.

“Where are we?” I asked, but with a wave she gestured me to silence.

“This is the Mud Queen’s territory,” she whispered. “Whatever you do, stay on the path and don’t follow the will o’ wisps or fireflies. They’ll lead you to your death.”

“You’re shivering!” I hiss, taking her hand again. Her skin was hot to the touch, and I began to question how this could be only a game when she seemed so sick. Did she eat something she shouldn’t’ve? Does she have a cold, like Mother always fears we’ll get? Or...

Did we stop playing a long time ago?

There was a smell in the air, something rotten and old, and the ground felt slimy and cold even in the intense heat. In front of me she stumbled and almost fell, and I barely caught her in time. I’d never seen her trip in the forest — I almost never tripped myself. We could navigate every path in our forest with eyes closed, but this place was alien. I had the sudden feeling that it knew us, and it did not want us there. I shivered and wrapped her arm around my shoulders, mostly to give her balance but really to make myself feel safe.

She was shaking, but her eyes seemed clearer than they had a moment ago, as if my fear had somehow given her strength. “If I don’t make it,” she said.

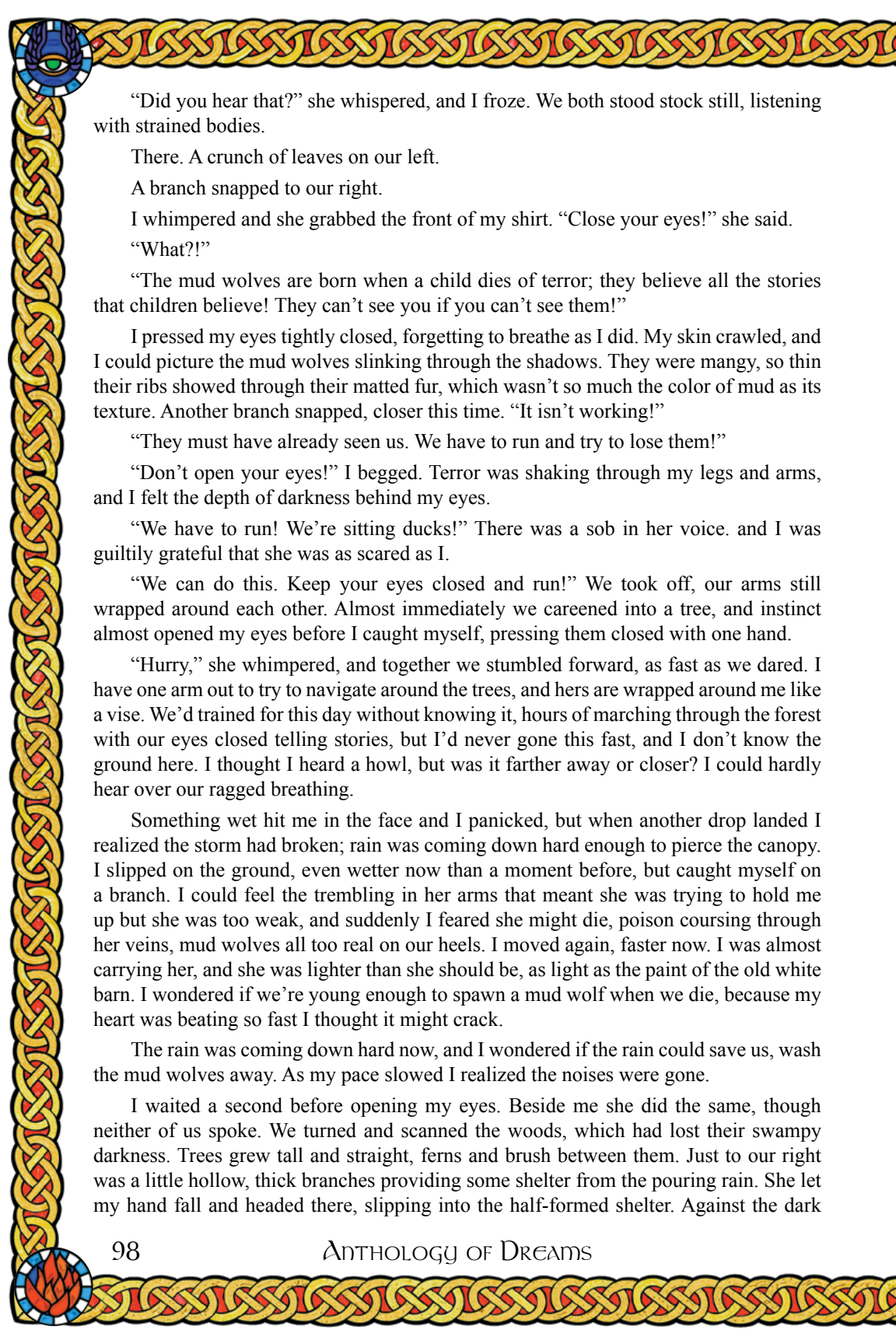
“Stop it! Don’t say things like that.”

“But if I don’t.”

“You will. We’re almost there. Can’t you see the mountains?”

We both looked up, almost instinctively on my part, but the sky was nothing but dark clouds, and even if there were mountains we wouldn’t have been able to see them through the trees.





“Did you hear that?” she whispered, and I froze. We both stood stock still, listening with strained bodies.

There. A crunch of leaves on our left.

A branch snapped to our right.

I whimpered and she grabbed the front of my shirt. “Close your eyes!” she said.

“What?!”

“The mud wolves are born when a child dies of terror; they believe all the stories that children believe! They can’t see you if you can’t see them!”

I pressed my eyes tightly closed, forgetting to breathe as I did. My skin crawled, and I could picture the mud wolves slinking through the shadows. They were mangy, so thin their ribs showed through their matted fur, which wasn’t so much the color of mud as its texture. Another branch snapped, closer this time. “It isn’t working!”

“They must have already seen us. We have to run and try to lose them!”

“Don’t open your eyes!” I begged. Terror was shaking through my legs and arms, and I felt the depth of darkness behind my eyes.

“We have to run! We’re sitting ducks!” There was a sob in her voice. and I was guiltily grateful that she was as scared as I.



“We can do this. Keep your eyes closed and run!” We took off, our arms still wrapped around each other. Almost immediately we careened into a tree, and instinct almost opened my eyes before I caught myself, pressing them closed with one hand.

“Hurry,” she whimpered, and together we stumbled forward, as fast as we dared. I have one arm out to try to navigate around the trees, and hers are wrapped around me like a vise. We’d trained for this day without knowing it, hours of marching through the forest with our eyes closed telling stories, but I’d never gone this fast, and I don’t know the ground here. I thought I heard a howl, but was it farther away or closer? I could hardly hear over our ragged breathing.

Something wet hit me in the face and I panicked, but when another drop landed I realized the storm had broken; rain was coming down hard enough to pierce the canopy. I slipped on the ground, even wetter now than a moment before, but caught myself on a branch. I could feel the trembling in her arms that meant she was trying to hold me up but she was too weak, and suddenly I feared she might die, poison coursing through her veins, mud wolves all too real on our heels. I moved again, faster now. I was almost carrying her, and she was lighter than she should be, as light as the paint of the old white barn. I wondered if we’re young enough to spawn a mud wolf when we die, because my heart was beating so fast I thought it might crack.

The rain was coming down hard now, and I wondered if the rain could save us, wash the mud wolves away. As my pace slowed I realized the noises were gone.

I waited a second before opening my eyes. Beside me she did the same, though neither of us spoke. We turned and scanned the woods, which had lost their swampy darkness. Trees grew tall and straight, ferns and brush between them. Just to our right was a little hollow, thick branches providing some shelter from the pouring rain. She let my hand fall and headed there, slipping into the half-formed shelter. Against the dark



black mud, she seemed even paler, and though her breath was coming stronger now, I knew what she would say when she reached a hand out to me.

“You have to go on without me.”

I nodded, and kissed her once for luck. The rain was falling hard, and it steamed where it touched her fever-hot skin. “Don’t be afraid,” I whispered.

I left her, and braved out into the storm.



I set out in the same direction we had been traveling. In a few hundred feet the trees began to peter out. Stunned, I came to a sudden stop at the lip of a huge canyon. It wasn’t a mountain, technically, except if you were at the bottom of it and looking up, and I knew that was where I had to go.

The descent was sharp and steep. A few times I lost control and careened five or ten feet before catching myself on a branch or root. By the time I reached the bottom I was more mud than girl, and yet the terror that had taken up root beside my heart unknotted, slipped away. I knew, suddenly, what I was looking for.

I scanned the ground for the forget-me-nevers’ tell-tale purple shine.

I did not look to see *if* it was there, but *where* it would be. My doubts were gone. I knew. I took a deep breath, and the world shifted into rainbow hues. The world crystallized, like a photo filter shifting everything to narrowed beams of darkness and light. The air hardened around my limbs, wrapping my skin in something both brittle and soft at once.

I breathed out, and the darkness shattered. Light and crystal broke around me, littering the ground with sparkling shards. Around me, the world was transformed. The storm was over, and the sky had a depth I had never seen. When I looked at my own arms they were dark, and in their depths I could almost imagine the stars spinning. The forest was alive, buzzing with sound and tiny lights that flickered like dust motes in sunlight. At my feet was a carpet of purple flowers, stretching as far into the distance as I could see. I reached down to pick one; its petals were soft as silk against my fingertips.

I turned, and without a sound she was beside me. “Am I dreaming?” I asked, and she smiled.

“No,” she said. Her hair was formed of wheat stalks, shifting with the music of the plants as if in a gentle breeze. Her skin was chalky and peeling like the old barn’s point, and in her eyes I saw Summer’s smile. “You’re finally awake.”



# MUCH ADO

*By Peter Woodworth*

There were already bodies on the ground when Saffron and Jimmy arrived. A few looked as though they had seen the end coming, and tried to find some comfortable place to greet it. Most, though, appeared to have fallen where they stood, leaving smashed bottles, smoldering ashes, and slowly drying pools of liquid scattered around them like shell casings in a war zone.

Altogether, it looked like it had been one hell of a party.

Saffron took in the blacked-out college students strewn among the remnants of the rager, her bushy eyebrows twitching. "So ... I thought eshu were always on time? Because I think we might be a few minutes late."

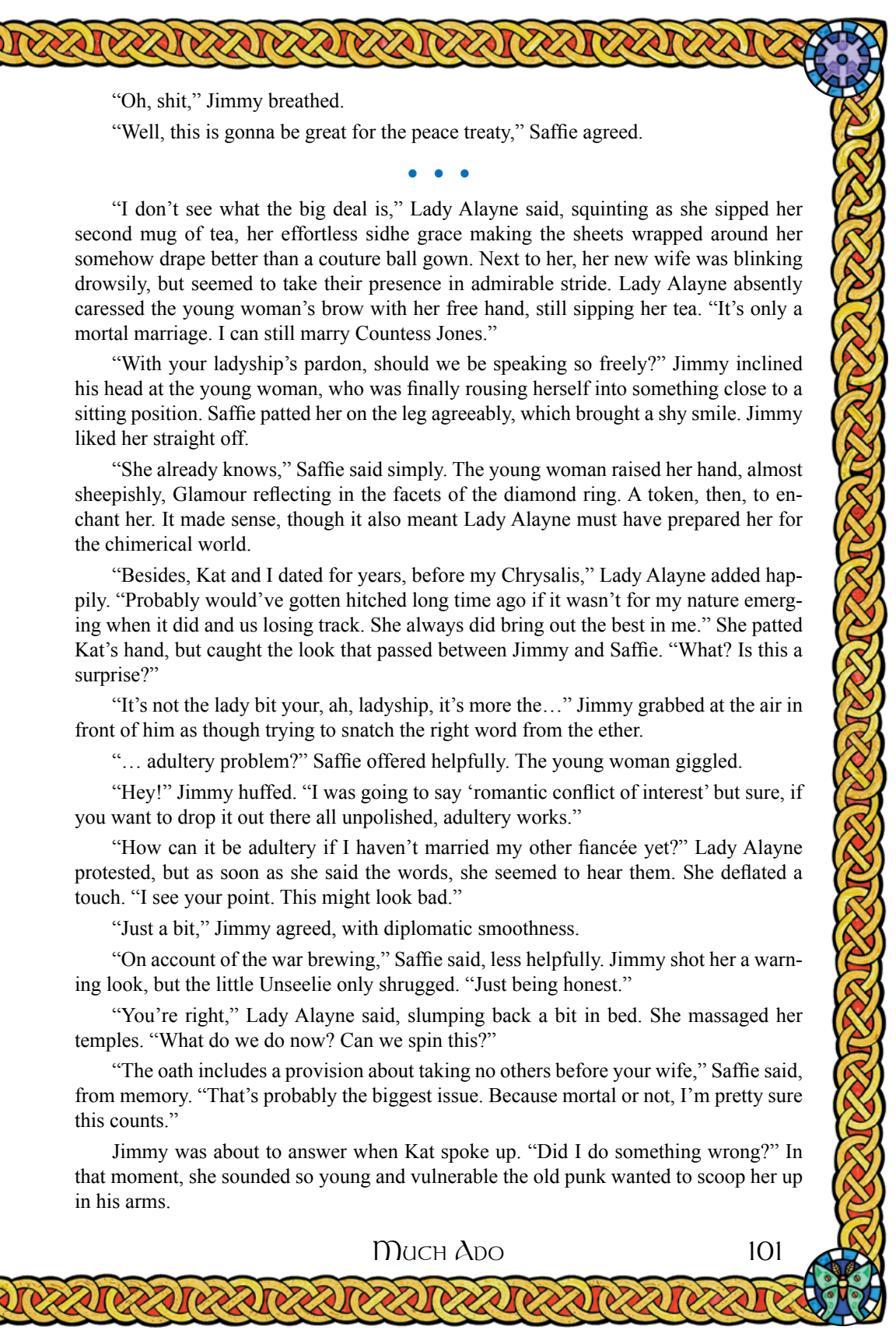
The old punk glared at her. "Look, I got the call same time as you, OK?" He was relieved this was looking less like a rescue and more like another bail out. "Let's just find her and get her out of here before Animal House wakes up. Countess Jones is already pissed her ladyship blew off her final dress fitting, I don't want to know what'll happen if m'lady stands up her fiancée for the rehearsal dinner too."

"Especially with that jerk, Sir Desmond, whispering in her ear." Saffron nodded, sizing up the room. *If I was party royalty, where would I crash?* Not out in the open. She thrust her chin in the direction of the back bedrooms and set off, threading between some beer pong casualties and a small pile of boxers. The door was ajar, revealing a partially nude young mortal woman and a fully nude Lady Alayne sprawled out on the bed.

"My lady," Jimmy said, ignoring modesty and going to her. "We have to go."

"Dun wanna," Lady Alayne muttered, rolling away from him. "Celebratin'." Without opening her eyes, she held up the girl's limp wrist, matching diamond bands sparkling on their ring fingers. "Got married last night."





“Oh, shit,” Jimmy breathed.

“Well, this is gonna be great for the peace treaty,” Saffie agreed.

• • •

“I don’t see what the big deal is,” Lady Alayne said, squinting as she sipped her second mug of tea, her effortless sidhe grace making the sheets wrapped around her somehow drape better than a couture ball gown. Next to her, her new wife was blinking drowsily, but seemed to take their presence in admirable stride. Lady Alayne absently caressed the young woman’s brow with her free hand, still sipping her tea. “It’s only a mortal marriage. I can still marry Countess Jones.”

“With your ladyship’s pardon, should we be speaking so freely?” Jimmy inclined his head at the young woman, who was finally rousing herself into something close to a sitting position. Saffie patted her on the leg agreeably, which brought a shy smile. Jimmy liked her straight off.

“She already knows,” Saffie said simply. The young woman raised her hand, almost sheepishly, Glamour reflecting in the facets of the diamond ring. A token, then, to enchant her. It made sense, though it also meant Lady Alayne must have prepared her for the chimerical world.

“Besides, Kat and I dated for years, before my Chrysalis,” Lady Alayne added happily. “Probably would’ve gotten hitched long time ago if it wasn’t for my nature emerging when it did and us losing track. She always did bring out the best in me.” She patted Kat’s hand, but caught the look that passed between Jimmy and Saffie. “What? Is this a surprise?”

“It’s not the lady bit your, ah, ladyship, it’s more the...” Jimmy grabbed at the air in front of him as though trying to snatch the right word from the ether.

“... adultery problem?” Saffie offered helpfully. The young woman giggled.

“Hey!” Jimmy huffed. “I was going to say ‘romantic conflict of interest’ but sure, if you want to drop it out there all unpolished, adultery works.”

“How can it be adultery if I haven’t married my other fiancée yet?” Lady Alayne protested, but as soon as she said the words, she seemed to hear them. She deflated a touch. “I see your point. This might look bad.”

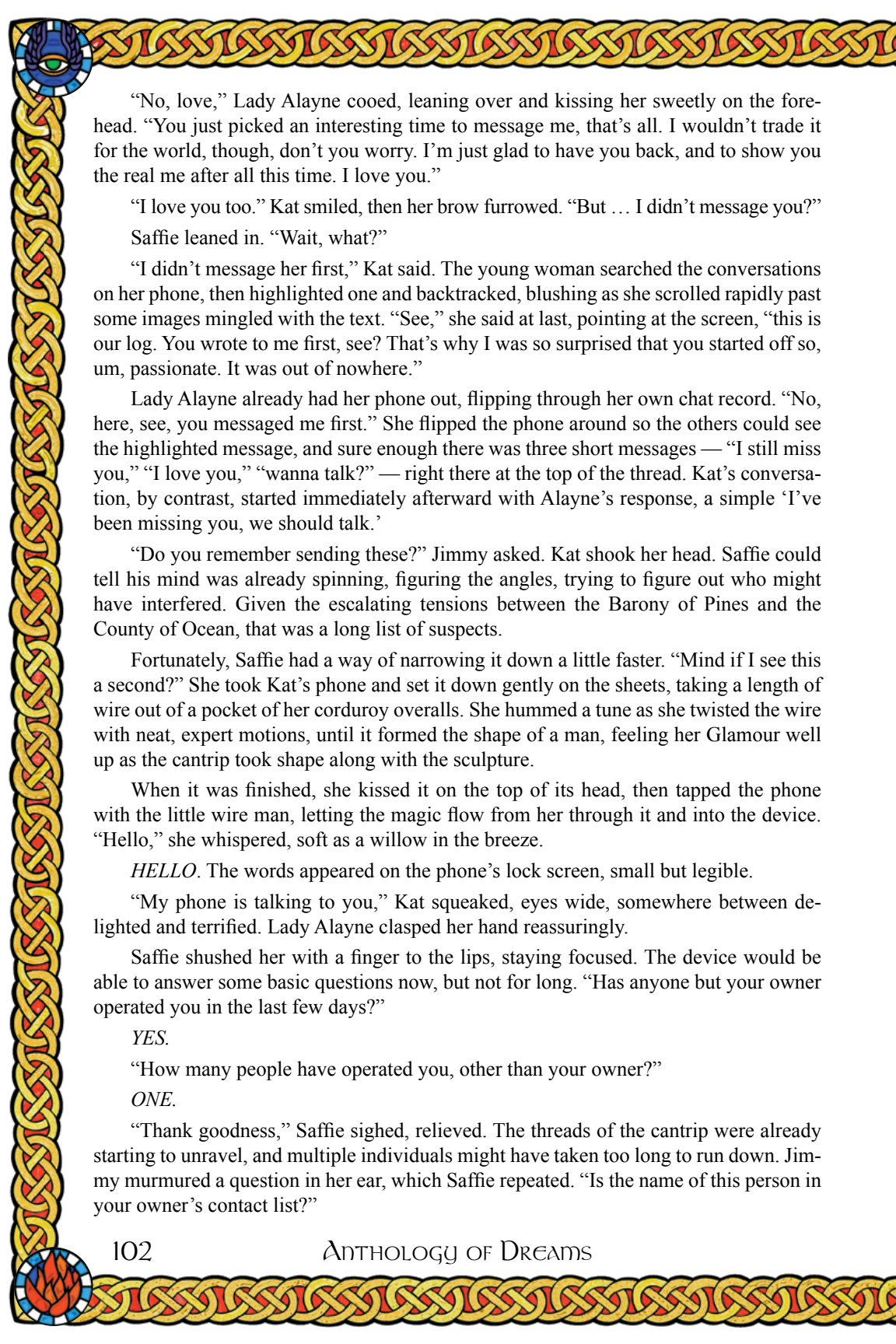
“Just a bit,” Jimmy agreed, with diplomatic smoothness.

“On account of the war brewing,” Saffie said, less helpfully. Jimmy shot her a warning look, but the little Unseelie only shrugged. “Just being honest.”

“You’re right,” Lady Alayne said, slumping back a bit in bed. She massaged her temples. “What do we do now? Can we spin this?”

“The oath includes a provision about taking no others before your wife,” Saffie said, from memory. “That’s probably the biggest issue. Because mortal or not, I’m pretty sure this counts.”

Jimmy was about to answer when Kat spoke up. “Did I do something wrong?” In that moment, she sounded so young and vulnerable the old punk wanted to scoop her up in his arms.



"No, love," Lady Alayne cooed, leaning over and kissing her sweetly on the forehead. "You just picked an interesting time to message me, that's all. I wouldn't trade it for the world, though, don't you worry. I'm just glad to have you back, and to show you the real me after all this time. I love you."

"I love you too." Kat smiled, then her brow furrowed. "But ... I didn't message you?"

Saffie leaned in. "Wait, what?"

"I didn't message her first," Kat said. The young woman searched the conversations on her phone, then highlighted one and backtracked, blushing as she scrolled rapidly past some images mingled with the text. "See," she said at last, pointing at the screen, "this is our log. You wrote to me first, see? That's why I was so surprised that you started off so, um, passionate. It was out of nowhere."

Lady Alayne already had her phone out, flipping through her own chat record. "No, here, see, you messaged me first." She flipped the phone around so the others could see the highlighted message, and sure enough there was three short messages — "I still miss you," "I love you," "wanna talk?" — right there at the top of the thread. Kat's conversation, by contrast, started immediately afterward with Alayne's response, a simple 'I've been missing you, we should talk.'

"Do you remember sending these?" Jimmy asked. Kat shook her head. Saffie could tell his mind was already spinning, figuring the angles, trying to figure out who might have interfered. Given the escalating tensions between the Barony of Pines and the County of Ocean, that was a long list of suspects.

Fortunately, Saffie had a way of narrowing it down a little faster. "Mind if I see this a second?" She took Kat's phone and set it down gently on the sheets, taking a length of wire out of a pocket of her corduroy overalls. She hummed a tune as she twisted the wire with neat, expert motions, until it formed the shape of a man, feeling her Glamour well up as the cantrip took shape along with the sculpture.

When it was finished, she kissed it on the top of its head, then tapped the phone with the little wire man, letting the magic flow from her through it and into the device. "Hello," she whispered, soft as a willow in the breeze.

*HELLO.* The words appeared on the phone's lock screen, small but legible.

"My phone is talking to you," Kat squeaked, eyes wide, somewhere between delighted and terrified. Lady Alayne clasped her hand reassuringly.

Saffie shushed her with a finger to the lips, staying focused. The device would be able to answer some basic questions now, but not for long. "Has anyone but your owner operated you in the last few days?"

*YES.*

"How many people have operated you, other than your owner?"

*ONE.*

"Thank goodness," Saffie sighed, relieved. The threads of the cantrip were already starting to unravel, and multiple individuals might have taken too long to run down. Jimmy murmured a question in her ear, which Saffie repeated. "Is the name of this person in your owner's contact list?"

*NO.*

“Do you have a picture of this person?”

*YES.*

Saffie looked at Kat, who shook her head, obviously not aware of any unusual pictures on the device. “Where is this picture?”

*TRASH.*

The little boggan picked up the phone and tapped menus until she found the deleted folder. Sure enough, there was an image file in the trash. When she clicked on it, it displayed a blurry picture, taken by accident while the camera was moving.

Saffie squinted, trying to make out details, then recognition set in and she blew out her cheeks slowly. Jimmy took the phone from her, had a similar moment of discovery, and handed the phone to Lady Alayne. Her lips pressed together until they were white, and she swore under her breath.

“Who is it?” Kat said, looking around the group. “And why I don’t remember any of that happening — the messages, the picture, any of it?”

“The answer to both of those questions,” Jimmy said grimly, “is Tommy Broadhead.”

• • •

Olga’s had been a local institution for years, though it was a hard, bitter sort of institution, like a reform school neither staff nor students found any value in attending. It one of those old diners that was always empty yet never closed, perpetually seeming at the edge of going out of business, yet somehow staying open out of sheer spite. The classic chrome look was spoiled by years of tarnish, the windows so weathered and scratched they were nearly opaque.

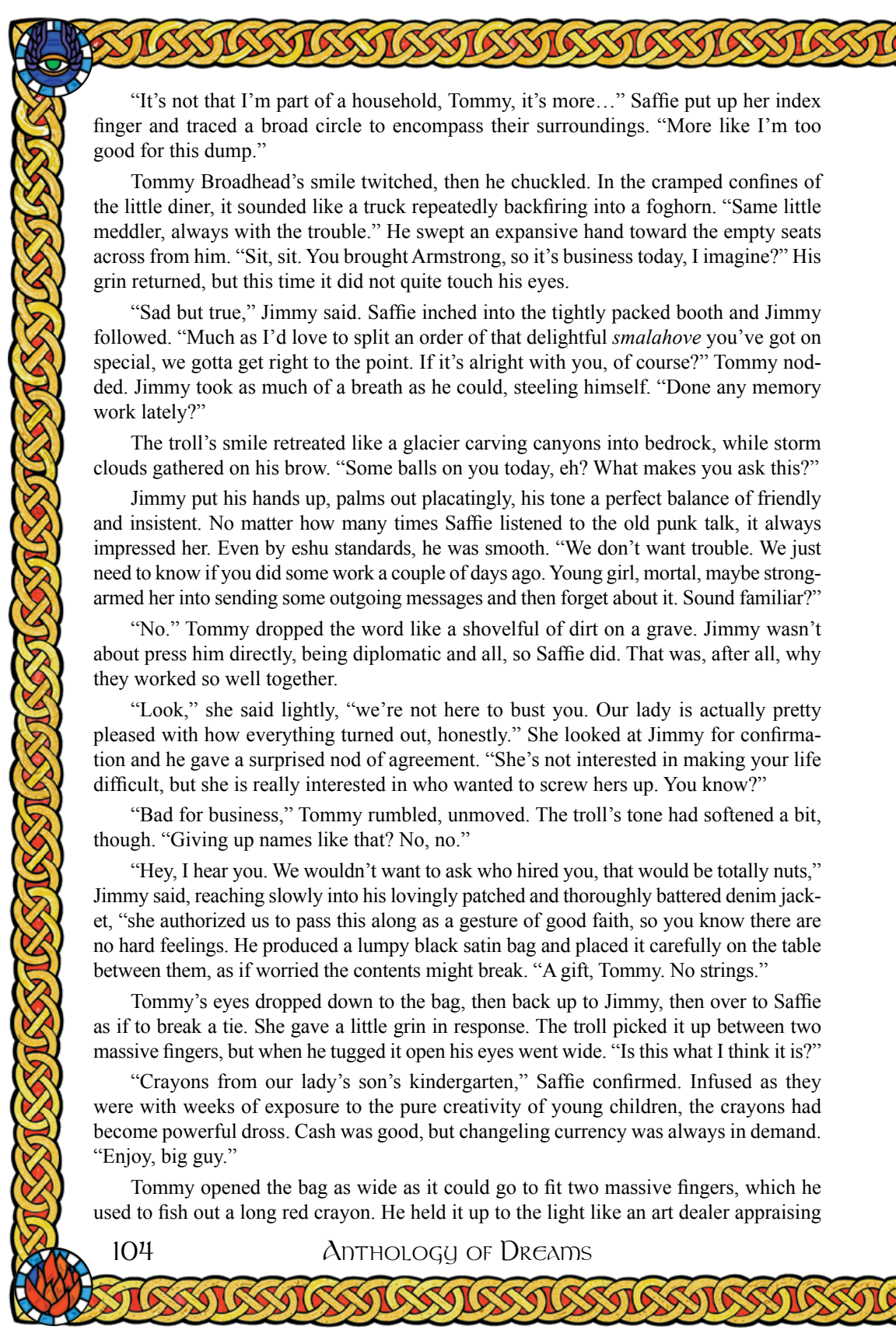
To changeling eyes, Olga’s looked much the same, though with a few distinctly medieval touches such as actual torches instead of flickering fluorescent lamps and scuffed animal pelts instead of shabby carpeting. A large “NO KITHAIN DISCOUNTS” sign hung next to the door on thick rope, blocky runic lettering angrily chiseled into chipped gray stone. The whole effect of the place could have only been more inhospitable if the staff had placed bear traps on the seats, and from the suspect look of some of the pelts they might have tried it.

It was, in short, precisely how the owner liked it.

Tommy Broadhead was enormous, even by troll standards, and his nickname wasn’t ironic. As a mortal, he had a head that was on the unsettling side of too large; as a troll, it was positively immense, as if blue-gray stone block had been dropped onto his shoulders. If he had a neck, it had long ago given up and retreated into his torso.

“Jimmy!” Tommy bellowed, turning in the cramped diner booth to look at the two commoners as they approached. He spotted Saffie just behind the old punk and grinned, big blocky white teeth surfacing from the darkness of his mouth like icebergs from deep water. “Saffron,” he rumbled, wagging a gnarled finger at her, “where have you been, girl? You too good to come around us lowly folk now that you’re with a household?”





"It's not that I'm part of a household, Tommy, it's more..." Saffie put up her index finger and traced a broad circle to encompass their surroundings. "More like I'm too good for this dump."

Tommy Broadhead's smile twitched, then he chuckled. In the cramped confines of the little diner, it sounded like a truck repeatedly backfiring into a foghorn. "Same little meddler, always with the trouble." He swept an expansive hand toward the empty seats across from him. "Sit, sit. You brought Armstrong, so it's business today, I imagine?" His grin returned, but this time it did not quite touch his eyes.

"Sad but true," Jimmy said. Saffie inched into the tightly packed booth and Jimmy followed. "Much as I'd love to split an order of that delightful *smalahove* you've got on special, we gotta get right to the point. If it's alright with you, of course?" Tommy nodded. Jimmy took as much of a breath as he could, steeling himself. "Done any memory work lately?"

The troll's smile retreated like a glacier carving canyons into bedrock, while storm clouds gathered on his brow. "Some balls on you today, eh? What makes you ask this?"

Jimmy put his hands up, palms out placatingly, his tone a perfect balance of friendly and insistent. No matter how many times Saffie listened to the old punk talk, it always impressed her. Even by eshu standards, he was smooth. "We don't want trouble. We just need to know if you did some work a couple of days ago. Young girl, mortal, maybe strong-armed her into sending some outgoing messages and then forget about it. Sound familiar?"

"No." Tommy dropped the word like a shovelful of dirt on a grave. Jimmy wasn't about press him directly, being diplomatic and all, so Saffie did. That was, after all, why they worked so well together.

"Look," she said lightly, "we're not here to bust you. Our lady is actually pretty pleased with how everything turned out, honestly." She looked at Jimmy for confirmation and he gave a surprised nod of agreement. "She's not interested in making your life difficult, but she is really interested in who wanted to screw hers up. You know?"

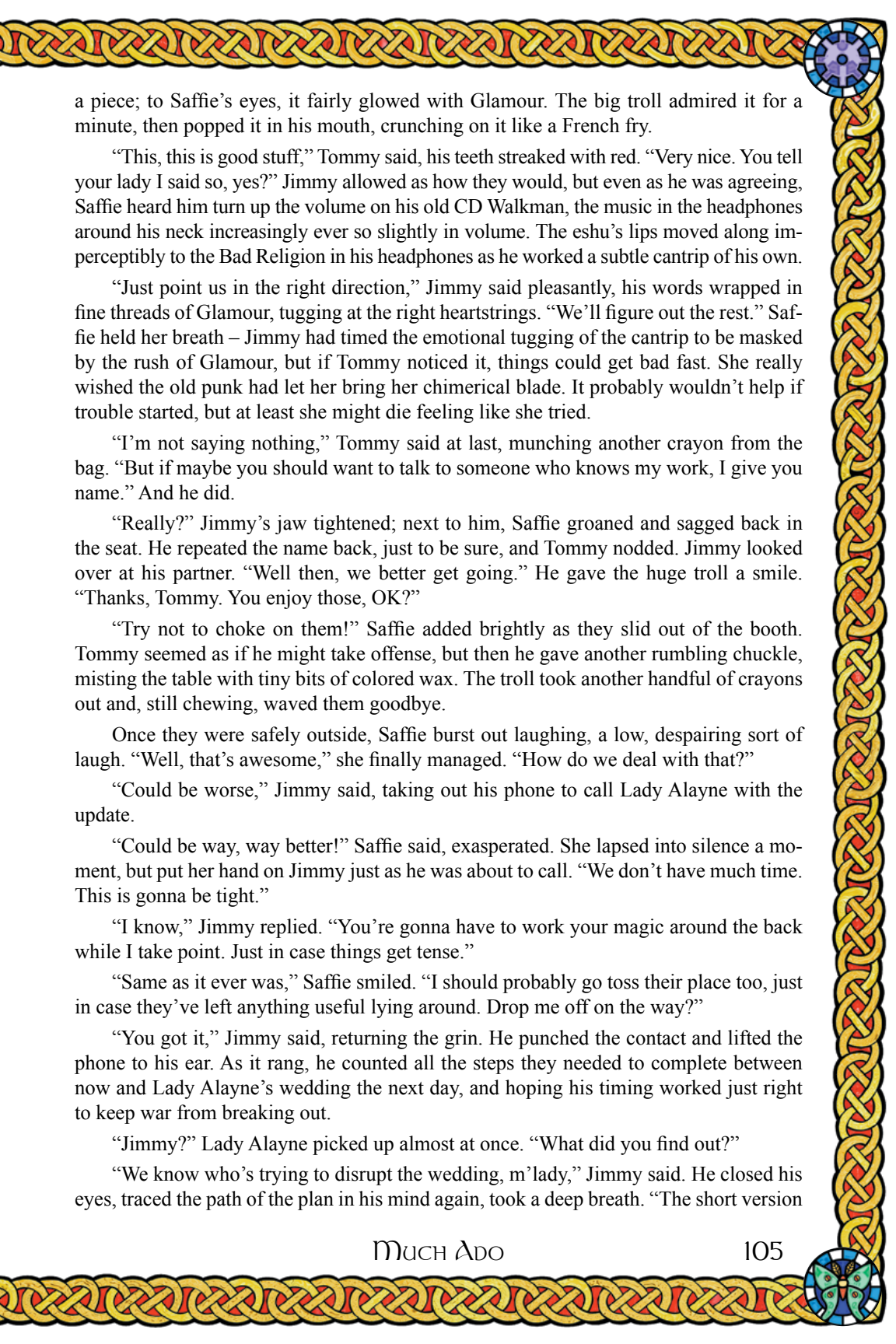
"Bad for business," Tommy rumbled, unmoved. The troll's tone had softened a bit, though. "Giving up names like that? No, no."

"Hey, I hear you. We wouldn't want to ask who hired you, that would be totally nuts," Jimmy said, reaching slowly into his lovingly patched and thoroughly battered denim jacket, "she authorized us to pass this along as a gesture of good faith, so you know there are no hard feelings. He produced a lumpy black satin bag and placed it carefully on the table between them, as if worried the contents might break. "A gift, Tommy. No strings."

Tommy's eyes dropped down to the bag, then back up to Jimmy, then over to Saffie as if to break a tie. She gave a little grin in response. The troll picked it up between two massive fingers, but when he tugged it open his eyes went wide. "Is this what I think it is?"

"Crayons from our lady's son's kindergarten," Saffie confirmed. Infused as they were with weeks of exposure to the pure creativity of young children, the crayons had become powerful dross. Cash was good, but changeling currency was always in demand. "Enjoy, big guy."

Tommy opened the bag as wide as it could go to fit two massive fingers, which he used to fish out a long red crayon. He held it up to the light like an art dealer appraising



a piece; to Saffie's eyes, it fairly glowed with Glamour. The big troll admired it for a minute, then popped it in his mouth, crunching on it like a French fry.

"This, this is good stuff," Tommy said, his teeth streaked with red. "Very nice. You tell your lady I said so, yes?" Jimmy allowed as how they would, but even as he was agreeing, Saffie heard him turn up the volume on his old CD Walkman, the music in the headphones around his neck increasingly ever so slightly in volume. The eshu's lips moved along imperceptibly to the Bad Religion in his headphones as he worked a subtle cantrip of his own.

"Just point us in the right direction," Jimmy said pleasantly, his words wrapped in fine threads of Glamour, tugging at the right heartstrings. "We'll figure out the rest." Saffie held her breath – Jimmy had timed the emotional tugging of the cantrip to be masked by the rush of Glamour, but if Tommy noticed it, things could get bad fast. She really wished the old punk had let her bring her chimerical blade. It probably wouldn't help if trouble started, but at least she might die feeling like she tried.

"I'm not saying nothing," Tommy said at last, munching another crayon from the bag. "But if maybe you should want to talk to someone who knows my work, I give you name." And he did.

"Really?" Jimmy's jaw tightened; next to him, Saffie groaned and sagged back in the seat. He repeated the name back, just to be sure, and Tommy nodded. Jimmy looked over at his partner. "Well then, we better get going." He gave the huge troll a smile. "Thanks, Tommy. You enjoy those, OK?"

"Try not to choke on them!" Saffie added brightly as they slid out of the booth. Tommy seemed as if he might take offense, but then he gave another rumbling chuckle, misting the table with tiny bits of colored wax. The troll took another handful of crayons out and, still chewing, waved them goodbye.

Once they were safely outside, Saffie burst out laughing, a low, despairing sort of laugh. "Well, that's awesome," she finally managed. "How do we deal with that?"

"Could be worse," Jimmy said, taking out his phone to call Lady Alayne with the update.

"Could be way, way better!" Saffie said, exasperated. She lapsed into silence a moment, but put her hand on Jimmy just as he was about to call. "We don't have much time. This is gonna be tight."


"I know," Jimmy replied. "You're gonna have to work your magic around the back while I take point. Just in case things get tense."

"Same as it ever was," Saffie smiled. "I should probably go toss their place too, just in case they've left anything useful lying around. Drop me off on the way?"

"You got it," Jimmy said, returning the grin. He punched the contact and lifted the phone to his ear. As it rang, he counted all the steps they needed to complete between now and Lady Alayne's wedding the next day, and hoping his timing worked just right to keep war from breaking out.

"Jimmy?" Lady Alayne picked up almost at once. "What did you find out?"

"We know who's trying to disrupt the wedding, m'lady," Jimmy said. He closed his eyes, traced the path of the plan in his mind again, took a deep breath. "The short version



is, you need to get your dress ready and act casual at the dinner tonight, then get Kat something nice to wear for tomorrow. You've both got a wedding to attend."

• • •

The grand Eventide Castle freehold of the Duchy of Bryn Athyn had been selected as the site of the wedding for a few reasons. First among them, it hosted mortal weddings throughout the year, making a Kithain ceremony simply a matter of discreetly discouraging mortal wedding crashers once the Glamour began flowing. For another, it was a stunning location, with lush rolling hills and flower beds ablaze with color and actual castles on the grounds that were only slightly more fantastical to changeling eyes than mortal ones. Perhaps most importantly for a wedding in such a contentious time, it was neutral territory, near enough to both the Barony of Pines and the County of Ocean to be interested in their peace but not closely tied to either of them.

Duchess Harper O'Neal ap Liam, the ruler of Bryn Athyn, was a statuesque sidhe warrior lady, with bright tattoos on her upper arms and hair that ran from deep red to white at the tips like a fox's tail. For the wedding, she wore a simple dress in her house colors, blue and silver, though the dress had a slit allowing a better range of motion, and underneath were slacks and practical boots to match the well-worn sword on her hip. She also wore a single silver pauldron engraved with the blasted tree of House Liam, the leather straps crisscrossing her body; it was a look that never should have worked outside of the cover of fantasy novel, Jimmy thought wryly, but that was the sidhe for you. Damn them.

"Y'Grace," Jimmy said, sketching a bow. He was clad in an old black blazer with checkerboard patches on the elbows, buttoned up to mostly conceal an old Op Ivy shirt, along with black and white pinstripe pants to match his classic two-tone Chucks. Harper scowled at the attire, but the twinkle in her eye told him that it was more for form than actual reprimand. "Did I miss it?"

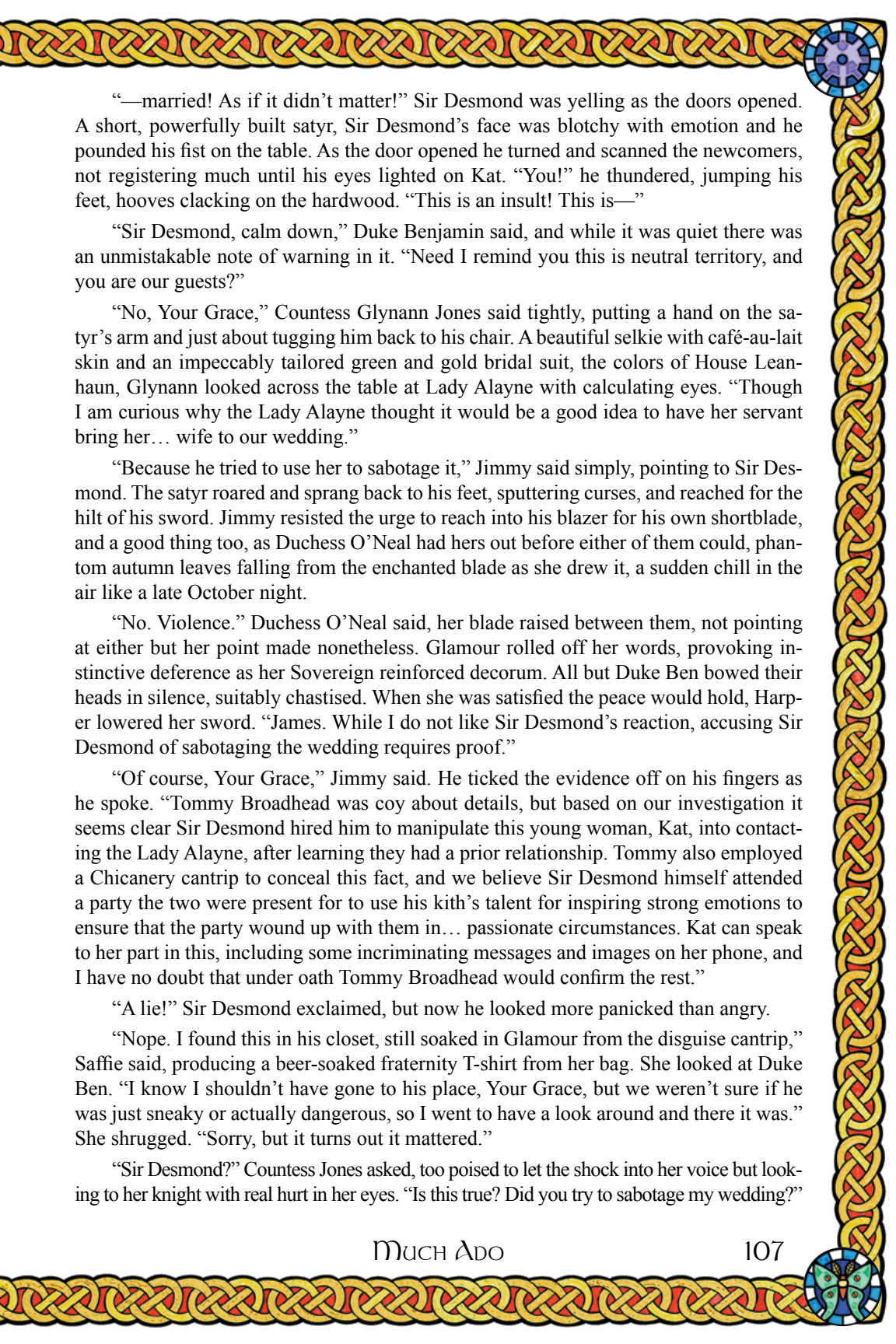
"You know you didn't," Duchess O'Neal, shaking her head. "Your other half arrived a little while ago, before the shouting started. I must warn you, though, it's not exactly going forward as planned. It's all Ben can do to keep the Protocol up or they'd be drawing swords right now." Ben was Duke Benjamin Connor ap Liam, the other half of the ruling pair of Bryn Athyn and the diplomat of the two. She looked past Jimmy to Kat, who was following some ways behind, eyes wide as she took in the blazing splendor of the place's chimerical aspect. "Oh, Jimmy," she breathed. "You didn't."

"So sorry, Y'Grace, but I had to. She's got important evidence to share, for one thing," Jimmy waited for Kat to catch up, then took her hand and gave it a supportive squeeze. "Besides, I think she has a right to be here, given the circumstances."

"I hope you know what you're doing," Duchess O'Neal said, but she didn't stop them. Instead she introduced herself graciously to the young woman, who returned it with an earnest if slightly stiff sort of newly memorized courtesy.

It didn't take long to follow the shouting to an upstairs room, where the doors opened to reveal Lady Alayne and Saffie sitting on one side of a wide oak table, with Countess Jones and Sir Desmond on the other. Duke Benjamin sat between them, a handsome man with a genial aspect in an impeccable suit of blue and silver, though he looked decidedly frazzled now. In the corner, Lady Alayne's young son Tristan played with action figures.





“—married! As if it didn’t matter!” Sir Desmond was yelling as the doors opened. A short, powerfully built satyr, Sir Desmond’s face was blotchy with emotion and he pounded his fist on the table. As the door opened he turned and scanned the newcomers, not registering much until his eyes lighted on Kat. “You!” he thundered, jumping his feet, hooves clacking on the hardwood. “This is an insult! This is—”

“Sir Desmond, calm down,” Duke Benjamin said, and while it was quiet there was an unmistakable note of warning in it. “Need I remind you this is neutral territory, and you are our guests?”

“No, Your Grace,” Countess Glynann Jones said tightly, putting a hand on the satyr’s arm and just about tugging him back to his chair. A beautiful selkie with café-au-lait skin and an impeccably tailored green and gold bridal suit, the colors of House Leanhaun, Glynann looked across the table at Lady Alayne with calculating eyes. “Though I am curious why the Lady Alayne thought it would be a good idea to have her servant bring her... wife to our wedding.”

“Because he tried to use her to sabotage it,” Jimmy said simply, pointing to Sir Desmond. The satyr roared and sprang back to his feet, sputtering curses, and reached for the hilt of his sword. Jimmy resisted the urge to reach into his blazer for his own shortblade, and a good thing too, as Duchess O’Neal had hers out before either of them could, phantom autumn leaves falling from the enchanted blade as she drew it, a sudden chill in the air like a late October night.

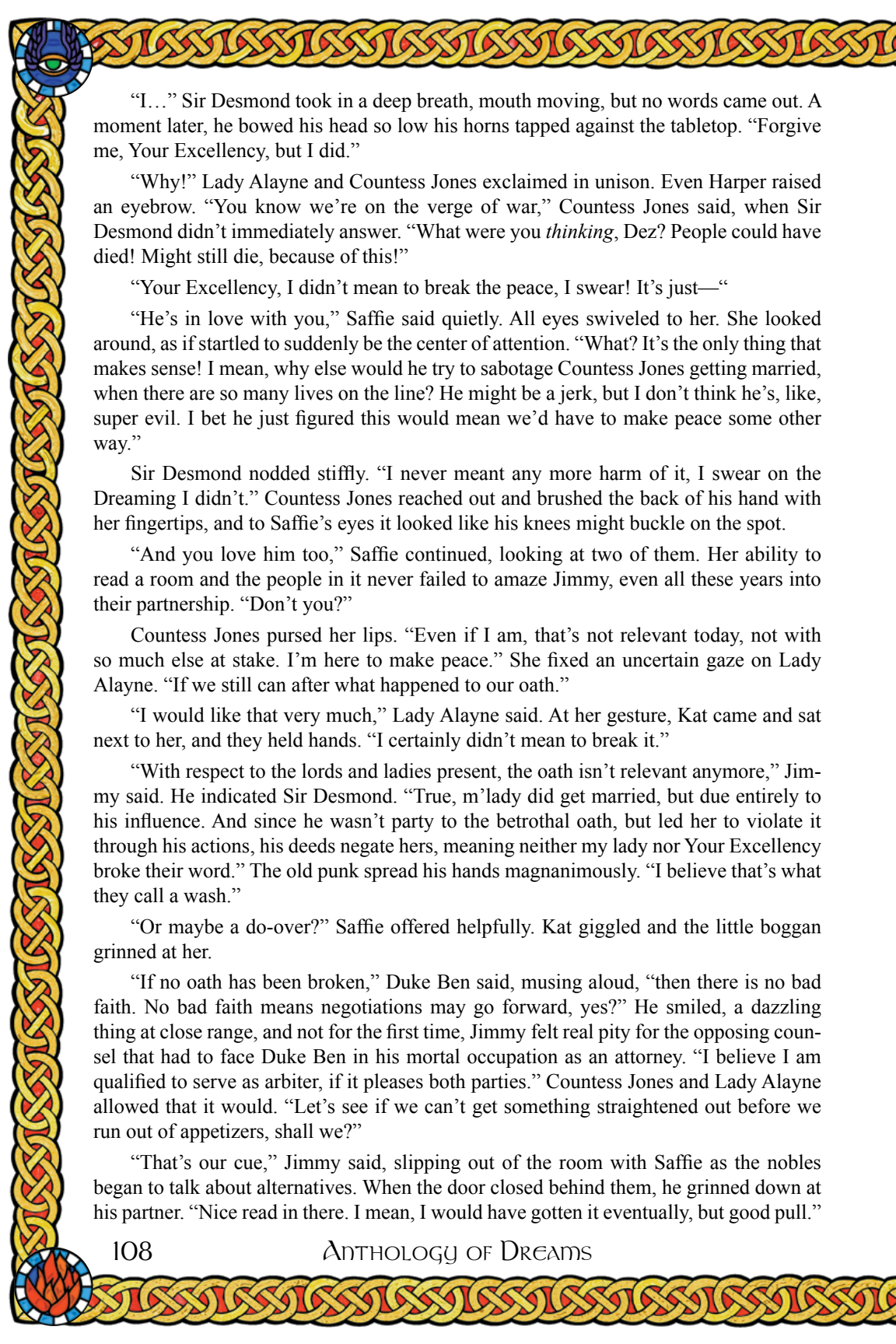
“No. Violence.” Duchess O’Neal said, her blade raised between them, not pointing at either but her point made nonetheless. Glamour rolled off her words, provoking instinctive deference as her Sovereign reinforced decorum. All but Duke Ben bowed their heads in silence, suitably chastised. When she was satisfied the peace would hold, Harper lowered her sword. “James. While I do not like Sir Desmond’s reaction, accusing Sir Desmond of sabotaging the wedding requires proof.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” Jimmy said. He ticked the evidence off on his fingers as he spoke. “Tommy Broadhead was coy about details, but based on our investigation it seems clear Sir Desmond hired him to manipulate this young woman, Kat, into contacting the Lady Alayne, after learning they had a prior relationship. Tommy also employed a Chicanery cantrip to conceal this fact, and we believe Sir Desmond himself attended a party the two were present for to use his kith’s talent for inspiring strong emotions to ensure that the party wound up with them in... passionate circumstances. Kat can speak to her part in this, including some incriminating messages and images on her phone, and I have no doubt that under oath Tommy Broadhead would confirm the rest.”

“A lie!” Sir Desmond exclaimed, but now he looked more panicked than angry.

“Nope. I found this in his closet, still soaked in Glamour from the disguise cantrip,” Saffie said, producing a beer-soaked fraternity T-shirt from her bag. She looked at Duke Ben. “I know I shouldn’t have gone to his place, Your Grace, but we weren’t sure if he was just sneaky or actually dangerous, so I went to have a look around and there it was.” She shrugged. “Sorry, but it turns out it mattered.”

“Sir Desmond?” Countess Jones asked, too poised to let the shock into her voice but looking to her knight with real hurt in her eyes. “Is this true? Did you try to sabotage my wedding?”



"I..." Sir Desmond took in a deep breath, mouth moving, but no words came out. A moment later, he bowed his head so low his horns tapped against the tabletop. "Forgive me, Your Excellency, but I did."

"Why!" Lady Alayne and Countess Jones exclaimed in unison. Even Harper raised an eyebrow. "You know we're on the verge of war," Countess Jones said, when Sir Desmond didn't immediately answer. "What were you *thinking*, Dez? People could have died! Might still die, because of this!"

"Your Excellency, I didn't mean to break the peace, I swear! It's just—"

"He's in love with you," Saffie said quietly. All eyes swiveled to her. She looked around, as if startled to suddenly be the center of attention. "What? It's the only thing that makes sense! I mean, why else would he try to sabotage Countess Jones getting married, when there are so many lives on the line? He might be a jerk, but I don't think he's, like, super evil. I bet he just figured this would mean we'd have to make peace some other way."

Sir Desmond nodded stiffly. "I never meant any more harm of it, I swear on the Dreaming I didn't." Countess Jones reached out and brushed the back of his hand with her fingertips, and to Saffie's eyes it looked like his knees might buckle on the spot.

"And you love him too," Saffie continued, looking at two of them. Her ability to read a room and the people in it never failed to amaze Jimmy, even all these years into their partnership. "Don't you?"

Countess Jones pursed her lips. "Even if I am, that's not relevant today, not with so much else at stake. I'm here to make peace." She fixed an uncertain gaze on Lady Alayne. "If we still can after what happened to our oath."

"I would like that very much," Lady Alayne said. At her gesture, Kat came and sat next to her, and they held hands. "I certainly didn't mean to break it."

"With respect to the lords and ladies present, the oath isn't relevant anymore," Jimmy said. He indicated Sir Desmond. "True, m'lady did get married, but due entirely to his influence. And since he wasn't party to the betrothal oath, but led her to violate it through his actions, his deeds negate hers, meaning neither my lady nor Your Excellency broke their word." The old punk spread his hands magnanimously. "I believe that's what they call a wash."

"Or maybe a do-over?" Saffie offered helpfully. Kat giggled and the little boggan grinned at her.

"If no oath has been broken," Duke Ben said, musing aloud, "then there is no bad faith. No bad faith means negotiations may go forward, yes?" He smiled, a dazzling thing at close range, and not for the first time, Jimmy felt real pity for the opposing counsel that had to face Duke Ben in his mortal occupation as an attorney. "I believe I am qualified to serve as arbiter, if it pleases both parties." Countess Jones and Lady Alayne allowed that it would. "Let's see if we can't get something straightened out before we run out of appetizers, shall we?"

"That's our cue," Jimmy said, slipping out of the room with Saffie as the nobles began to talk about alternatives. When the door closed behind them, he grinned down at his partner. "Nice read in there. I mean, I would have gotten it eventually, but good pull."

“What can I say,” Saffie said loftily, smoothing her artful patchwork skirt, “it’s a gift. You think they’ll work something out?”

“Like you said, a mortal marriage doesn’t preclude a Kithain one,” Jimmy mused as Saffie snagged champagne from a passing waiter. He helped himself to some bacon wrapped shrimp and winced at the elegant but entirely unimaginative music the DJ was spinning for the cocktail hour. “And if there’s no oath broken, I don’t see why not.”

“Love does tend to bypass obstacles eventually,” Saffie agreed. “It’s clever like that.”

“We should know.” Jimmy laughed as Saffie elbowed him. “Now, the real question: do you think it’s too early to hijack the DJ booth?”

“Never.” Saffie stuck her elbow out again and this time Jimmy took it with a flourish. “Shall we?” A few minutes later a boisterous shout went up as the classical music abruptly changed to swing-infused electronica, and the two commoners who’d just handily averted a war took to the dance floor and earned their first cheer of the night.







# ABOUT THE AUTHORS


**Deborah J. Brannon** (codename: Geek Dame) spends her days in the South herding words by freelancing, with nights and weekends dedicated to scribbling furiously, RPGs (tabletop and video), and a dubious amount of television. Her articles and reviews have appeared in *Faerie Magazine*, *Front Page Meews*, and *Cabinet des Fées*, while her original work can be found here, in *Human Tales* (editor: Jennifer Brozek), *Scheherezade's Bequest*, and more. You can find more articles, reviews, and unabashed excitement on all things geek (flavor: SFF) at [www.geekdame.com](http://www.geekdame.com). Follow her on Twitter as @geekdame.

**Abigail Corfman** is a writer and video game designer. When not writing short stories about fairies, she writes text-based interactive fiction about technomagic. Her first game, **Open Sorcery** has been exhibited at PAX and IndieCade. It recently won 'Most Innovative Game' at the Meaningful Play conference. <http://www.abigailcorfman.com/>

**Nathan Dorey** is a mild-mannered web developer and media writer. By day, at least. By night, he eschews sleep to drink scotch and write about demons, werewolves, children, and other monsters. He has contributed to both *World of Darkness* and *Chronicles of Darkness*, and is partway through writing at least three novels. He lives in Melbourne, Australia with his wife, kids, and a cat who insists on turning all his black t-shirts ginger.

**Wren Handman** is the author of three novels, including a fantasy adventure story (*Command the Tides*, Omnific Publishing) and a paranormal YA novel (*In Restless Dreams*, Wandering Roots Press). She's written a multitude of plays, one television show (*The Switch*, which aired in Canada on OutTV), and an endless panorama of flash fiction. In her day job Wren writes about virtual reality for Hammer & Tusk, a VR creation studio. Her work on the future has been published in *Motherboard* and *Venturebeat*, and she is a regular contributor to *VR Today Magazine*.

**Jason Ross Inczauskis**, also known online as White Oak Dragon, has a Master of Science degree in Plant Biology. He is a writer, a poet, a philosopher, and a storyteller. He enjoys researching folklore and mythology. He began roleplaying over two decades ago,



strongly favoring the **World of Darkness** and **Chronicles of Darkness** game settings. He is an avid creator of fan materials for his favorite game lines, and has multiple games of his own creation in various stages of completion. Two Conditions, Festive Fury, and Holiday Dinner, were published as part of the 12 Days of Onyx Condition Cards. “No Such Thing as Dragons” is his first contribution to a major Onyx Path Publishing project.

**Myranda Kalis** is a Freelance Writer of Fortune hailing from the wilds of South-eastern Pennsylvania. She resides in a hobbit hole with her husband, two children, several dogs, and a collection of roleplaying game paraphernalia so vast that the floor groans under the weight. She has written for White Wolf Game Studio, Onyx Path Publishing, Green Ronin Press, and her own amusement for more than fifteen years.

A modern-day Renaissance-woman, **Katherine McIntyre** has learned soapmaking, beer brewing, tea blending, and roasting coffee, which makes sure she’s hydrated and bathed while she spends the rest of her time writing. With a desire to travel and more imagination than she knows what to do with, all the stories jumping around in her head led to the logical route of jotting them down on paper. She writes novels featuring snarky women, ragtag crews, and men with bad attitudes. High chances for a passionate speech thrown into the mix. Keep up with her latest releases over at <http://www.katherine-mcintyre.com>

**Matthew McFarland** is an ENnie Award-winning game author and developer. His work has appeared in almost all of the World and Chronicles of Darkness games, and he developed **Changeling: The Dreaming 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition**. In addition to working as a speech-language pathologist in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, he and his wife, Michelle Lyons-McFarland, own and operate Growling Door Games, Inc. <http://growlingdoorgames.com>.

**Geoffrey McVey** is a freelance writer, game designer, and semi-retired academic. He has been involved in roleplaying games for over thirty years and contributed to Onyx Path Publishing projects in the past, but this is his first submission to a fiction anthology.

**Julia Papke** is a linguist, an artist, and a writer- all of them both recreationally and sometimes professionally. She has played **Changeling** since she first started roleplaying at age 16. She studies languages in varying states of realness, and speaks enough Irish to correctly pronounce **Changeling** game terminology. She was previously published in *The Road to Hell on Earth* from Growling Door Games.

**Peter Woodworth** is an English professor, game designer, and freelance writer, not necessarily in that order. He has been gaming since he stumbled across a set of D&D dice in first grade (no, really!), and a professional game writer since he was 15. He’s written for both incarnations of the **World of Darkness** setting since 1997, where he developed for Mind’s Eye Theater and cultivated a love of all things LARP. His credits include both versions of Changeling and Vampire, as well as Beast, Hunter, and Wraith. He has also accumulated fiction and game writing credits for Galileo Games, Evil Hat Productions, ArtHaus, Magpie Games, Eschaton Media, and West End Games. You can find him online at [peterwoodworth.com](http://peterwoodworth.com).



# ANTHOLOGY OF DREAMS

MATTHEW MCFARLAND

We dream, and we tell stories. We dream of love and the sort of person who might complete us. We dream of horror and wake breathless. We dream of magic, of flying through the air, or breathing underwater. We dream of fantastic vistas and amazing monsters.

We dream, and then we wake, and we tell stories. Our dreams create the Kithain, the changelings. Our stories are sustenance.

The Anthology of Dreams contains ten new stories inspired by Changeling: The Dreaming 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition, including new fiction from:

Deborah J. Brannon

Abigail Corfman

Nathan Dorey

Wren Handman

Jason Ross Inczauskis

Myranda Kalis

Katherine McIntyre

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